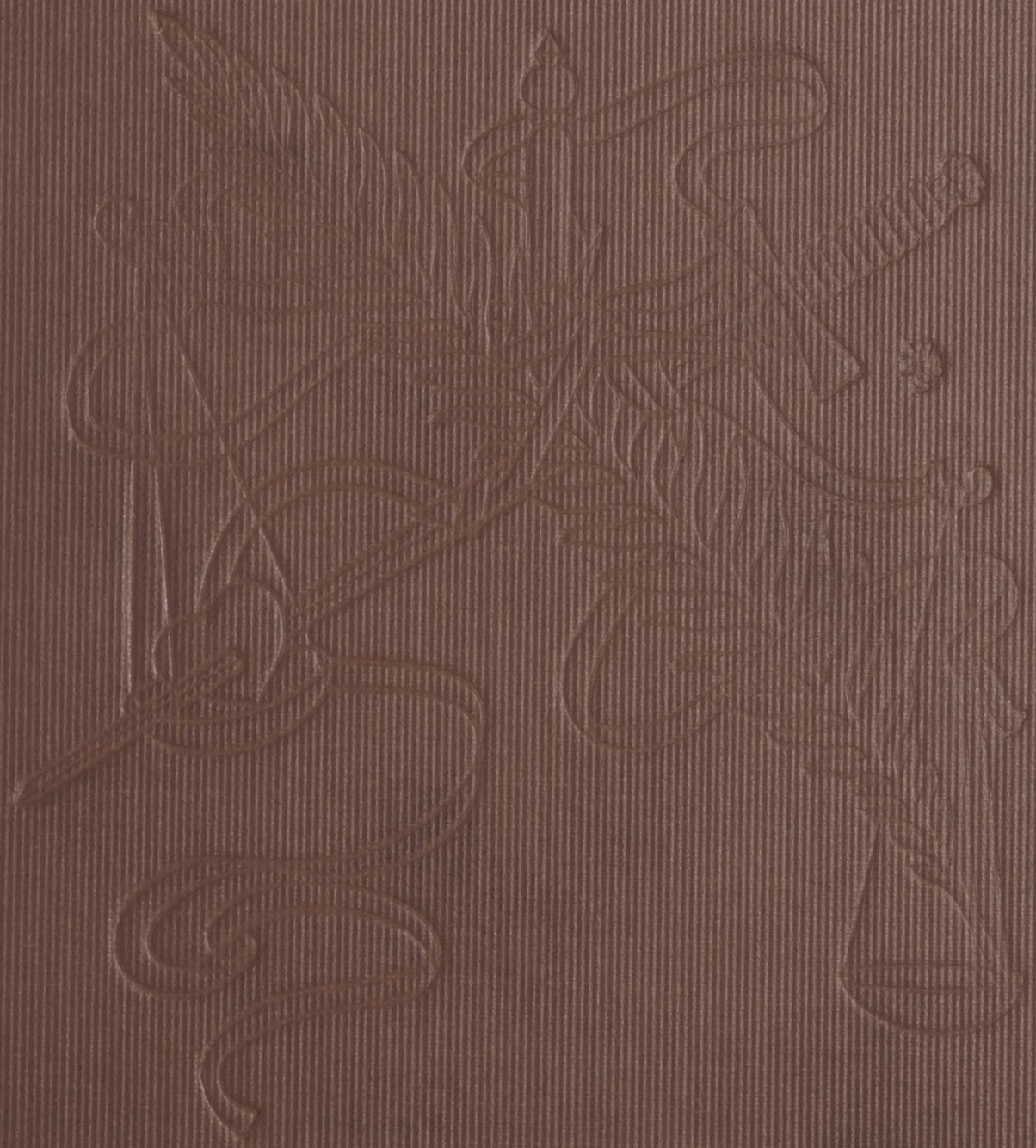
Time and the Woman



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It was with a hand that expressed impatience that Mrs. Ruthven roused her daughter.

Time and the Woman

A NOVEL

BY
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TIME AND THE WOMAN

Time and the Woman

CHAPTER I.

Mrs. Sandon, in an indolent and unaggressive sort of way, disapproved of her Indian cousin. But she was fond of her at the same time. Moreover, she was a mischievous old woman, who liked amusement herself, and as the Ruthvens were staying with her in Earl Street, she gave a series of small dinner-parties, at one of which she gave Mrs. Ruthven her best young man.

Very possibly it is unfortunate for a girl to have a mother who scarcely looks any older than herself. Mrs. Sandon, sitting in the stalls at the Panton, whither the party had adjourned because the play had the grace to begin at nine instead of eight, and the hostess had too much respect for her cook to hurry the courses, said something of the sort to her neighbor, Lady Murgatroyd.

The curtain had risen, and a rude person in the pit—the row in which the old lady was sitting

was somewhat far back—growled, and said "Ssh! Ssh!" very audibly. One or two other people turned their heads; Mrs. Sandon felt that she ought not to have been talking, that the rebuke was deserved, and she lapsed into silence; and wondered whether at her age a risky, frisky farce really amused her. Some one, a frolicsome wife, was hiding under a table; an equally frolicsome husband had drenched a waiter with a garden hose. The house shook with merriment. Mrs. Ruthven laughed with the rest and displayed very pretty teeth. Gerald Ventnor noted their whiteness and their evenness, as she leant across him to speak to her daughter, who sat with a grave face.

"Aren't you amused?"

The girl looked round. Mrs. Ruthven repeated her question.

"Yes, at least I think so. Perhaps not very much; I don't know. If one thinks of it it is dreadful. It ought to be rather serious, and one is supposed to laugh. . . . ."

"Oh, serious!" said Mrs. Ruthven.

Mrs. Sandon touched Lady Murgatroyd's arm gently with her fan.

"Look at that," she said.

"And then I don't think I understand it all," added Miss Ruthven.

"What a loss it is to have so little imagination," said her mother.

"But this sort of thing requires a certain slang education," said Gerald lightly.

"Coupled with the *sine qua non* of having what you call well-dined," put in another of Mrs. Sandon's party.

"You speak as a man," said Mrs. Ruthven, smiling.

"And I have what you call well-dined," said Miss Ruthven.

At this the others laughed, and she wondered why as she hastened to add——

"So it must be as mother says, that I have no imagination."

"Araby is rather impossible," Mrs. Ruthven said to Ventnor, as one who sums up a matter and dismisses it.

Miss Ruthven's name for family reasons was Arabella. It was to her mother that she owed its conversion to the softer-sounding Araby.

When the curtain fell Mrs. Sandon resumed——

"This won't get better. I am sorry for that girl, and I wonder myself how it will all end. Johnnie—ridiculous not to say vulgar name for a married woman, it sounds to me almost improper—Johnnie, I say, has had a high old time—isn't that what they call it?—in India. Has kippled at dreadfully naughty and attractive places, about the Simla to her heart's content, and at all those other

goings-on at which we all know so much now. Well, she means to have as good a time as she can still. As it is, since she has been with me half a dozen of her young men have already been to look her up. Yes, isn't she pretty? Of course I have known her all her life, and I declare she scarcely looks a day older than when she married Corbet. That must be nineteen years ago, and Johnnie Ruthven is, I suppose, in her thirty-eighth year."

Lady Murgatroyd said that did not seem possible. She launched into a disquisition as to what makes or does not make a woman age. Mrs. Ruthven she thought could not have had many disappointments.

"Well, no," said Mrs. Sandon, "I do not know that she has. She takes things very quietly, and I do not think she worries herself over trifles."

Mrs. Sandon looked at the lines on Lady Murgatroyd's face as she spoke, and did not say, though she thought it, that one or two of these might have been spared her friend if she had gone upon a like principle.

There was a pause, which was filled by the hum of talk in the theatre. Lady Murgatroyd contemplated Miss Ruthven closely.

"She is nearly as beautiful as her mother," she said presently.

Mrs. Sandon looked from one to the other.

Joan Ruthven, or Johnnie, as she was known to her intimate friends and Mrs. Sandon's more or less pretended disapproval, was in truth wonderfully well-preserved. Indeed so young did she appear, that to the casual observer her looks did not suggest that they owed anything to preservation at all. She had a slim tall figure, supple as a girl's, with the lithe straightness of the good horsewoman. Her face had the most frank and open expression. It was innocent as a child's, and there was much that was childish in the beautiful mouth; but Mrs. Sandon, speaking of her eyes, said that you could see them across the street.

Araby resembled her mother only in outline. She too was tall and straight, but her slightness was more pronounced and her coloring was altogether different. While Mrs. Ruthven had brown hair, and eyes of the darkest blue, Araby was unusually fair. Her hair was of a shade of red which Mrs. Ruthven chose not to admire. It was soft, and dry, and feathery, and it blazed with golden lights. She reminded you at times of a Romney, at times of a Greuze. She had, it is true, the same childish mouth as her mother, but here all likeness ceased. Her nose called for no comment, good or bad, and her eyes, up to the time of which I write, she had only used to see with. Even thus it is probable that many things escaped her which to others were

sufficiently obvious. She had a rose-leaf complexion of which she took great care, and a color that was ready in response to excitement, pleasure, interest, and the like. Her beauty was more prospective than actual.

Seated between the girl and the mother, Gerald Ventnor found himself as a matter of course talking to the mother. Miss Ruthven's unobtrusiveness was somehow such as to cause her to be dismissed by a certain type of man as *ingenue*. When occasionally Gerald looked at her it was to wonder whether she knew her own beauty. He did not think that she did, and he thought once that it might be amusing to tell her. Unconsciously he thought of her as a little girl to whom it was good-natured to address an occasional remark, but who would not of course expect it. This, though he did not know it, was somehow contrived by Mrs. Ruthven. She had a way of influencing people without their knowledge.

"Now look at that," began Mrs. Sandon presently, but the rude and socialistic person in the pit said *Ssh* again, and she, turning round indignantly this time, waited nevertheless as before till the end of the act.

The house was full; not a gap was to be seen in the rows of stalls. The theatre had the brilliant and prosperous appearance that argues that the

seats have been paid for, and that "paper" is unknown. The red silk handkerchief of distant Bayswater and the plush cloaks of the suburbs were absent. Smart, well-dined London was in evidence.

"What I wanted to say," said Mrs. Sandon, when the curtain fell upon the second act, "what I wanted to say was, just note how Mrs. Ruthven takes possession of a man. Gerald Ventnor has spoken about six words to Araby since the beginning of the evening. By the bye, how furious his mother will be if she takes him up—Mrs. Ruthven I mean." Mrs. Sandon chuckled at the mere thought. Lady Ventnor's alarms on Gerald's account were a source of constant amusement to her.

"And the husband?" asked Lady Murgatroyd.

"Whose? Oh, Mrs. Ruthven's husband?"

Lady Murgatroyd nodded.

"Well, that's what I don't understand—what I suppose no one ever will understand," said Mrs. Sandon. "He doesn't interfere; he lets her do exactly as she likes. No, we shall never get at the bottom of that story! Corbet Ruthven was madly in love with her when he married. My dear Lady Murgatroyd, you never saw a man more restlessly miserable after he met her at a Woolwich ball, nor more wildly elated when, after playing

him like a fish, she accepted him. He wasn't so well off then, you know, as he is now. His uncle was alive in those days. He made a confidante of me—Corbet and I were always good friends. I have seen him walk up and down my drawing-room in Earl Street, till I thought he would wear holes in the carpet. He talked to me of her for hours. Well, they were married, and he wrote me rapturous letters about his happiness. That lasted for about a year; then he began to say less about her; then she dropped out of his letters; then he stopped writing altogether, and I heard from every one that Corbet Ruthven was dropping his friends. His uncle died and left him the tea business, and Corbet left the service, which I always thought a pity. I found him greatly changed when I saw him last; that was about six years ago. He came home for a couple of months to see Araby, who was living with two Miss Woottons, aunts of his. He seemed to be absolutely indifferent to all that Johnnie did. They didn't quarrel, you must understand,—she is a great deal too clever for that,—he just went his way and let her go hers."

"Did she come home with him?"

"No, she was amusing herself in the hills with her pet young men. He laughed about it, and called them Johnnie's Johnnies. Poor Corbet!"

"Why did she marry him?"

"He was a good match for her. The Linton girls hadn't a penny of their own; their faces were their fortunes. Rose, the other one, married well too, but she died. Corbet had a little money, and the prospects which were afterwards realized; so Joan, after keeping him dangling on for two or three months, married him. Whether she ever really cared for him or not I cannot say. I dare say the attention she got turned her head a little. One thing, by the way, which Corbet said to me, struck me as significant. He was regretting the separation from Araby, and there were reasons why he could not leave the tea business. I said that in time Araby would be able to go out to him, and he said never. Araby should not set her foot in India with his consent. I inferred not a little from this."

There was a pause. Mrs. Sandon smiled to herself.

"You must understand me," she said then. "I am really very fond of Johnnie, with all her faults, I always was, and she has been uniformly delightful to me. I love her pretty face. Just watch her mouth as she speaks. Have you ever seen anything more beguiling? Do you wonder that men fall in love with her? I have only to look at her to forgive her everything."

Lady Murgatroyd, who was always thinking of her own plain face, and she had perhaps an exaggerated idea of its plainness, sighed.

"What did you say?" asked Mrs. Sandon.

"Nothing," said Lady Murgatroyd, "nothing. Look, I think Mr. Ventnor wants to catch your eye."

Gerald was leaning over the back of his stall.

"I want you all to come back to supper with me at the club. Mrs. Ruthven is good enough to say that she will come if you will, so you must not refuse me, Mrs. Sandon."

"My dear Gerald, I couldn't think of it. I should be dead to-morrow. It is very nice of you all the same. But my not going need not prevent any one else. Lady Murgatroyd, you will go?"

Lady Murgatroyd shook her head. She was a little bit tired, she said. It was most good of Mr. Ventnor, but Lady Murgatroyd thought she would rather go home from the theatre.

"I will drop you in Earl Street then," said Mrs. Sandon, "and Mrs. Ruthven must chaperon the girls. Johnnie, I give Miss Norfolk into your care. Is Mr. Hartford going with you? Yes? And Mr. Vine and Mr. Le Marchant?"

The two men she named last regretted that they were going on to a ball.

Ventnor went out to telegraph his orders to his club, and Mrs. Sandon said to her neighbor,

"I quite wish I was going with them, but it would not have been fair to spoil their fun, would it?"

Lady Murgatroyd set her teeth. She had an unhappy knack of imagining slights that were not intended. She was morbidly sensitive, and time had no power to blunt the quality.

When the play came to an end Mrs. Ruthven, fastening her cloak, a wonderful thing of silk and feathers, leant over towards Mrs. Sandon.

"You will take Araby home," she said, in her sweet voice.

"But surely Araby is going with you," Mrs. Sandon said, raising her eyebrows and speaking in a tone of mild expostulation.

Mrs. Ruthven shook her head.

"I am quite ready to go home," said Araby, good-temperedly.

"The best girl in the world," whispered Mrs. Sandon to Lady Murgatroyd. "But I should rather like to shake Johnnie."

It was not till the Earl Street party had driven off that Gerald saw what had happened. It chanced that it was Hartford, and not he, who put them into their carriage.

"I am sorry," he said, more than once in the hansom; "I hope Miss Ruthven knew she was asked. I thought it was quite understood that you were all coming."

"We should have made an odd number," said Mrs. Ruthven.

"I am sorry though," said Ventnor.

CHAPTER II.

Mrs. Ruthven and Ventnor had barely alighted when they were joined by Miss Norfolk and Hartford, whose hansom had been following closely in the track of their own. Gerald led the way to the room, where a table awaited the arrival of his supper-party.

Several others were occupied, and the candles with their red shades dotted the room like flowers with hearts of flame.

Ventnor exchanged nods with a man or two of his acquaintance. People looked up, and glancing casually first at the group focused thier gaze by degrees on to Mrs. Ruthven. Supper passed merrily enough. Some one said something about a survival of the fittest. Gerald made an admirable host. Mrs. Ruthven talked lightly and laughed often. She had an attractive laugh that made you wish to laugh too. Gerald sought a word to express her, and found it he thought in *provocante*.

Miss Norfolk, an old friend of Gerald's, was of the type of girl that Mrs. Ruthven approved. She may be here described briefly as the child

of her decade. She was very much on the spot, and she thoroughly understood that she was to talk to Hartford. She was nothing loth.

"A girl to make one's useful friend," Mrs. Ruthven said to herself; "I will see something of her later on."

Afterwards she found an opportunity of admiring Miss Norfolk's dress. Mrs. Ruthven was always as ready to annex a girl as to annex a man, though for different reasons.

Ventnor, whose regrets as to the absence of Miss Ruthven were half sincere and half conventional, had long since allowed them to sink to rest in the charm of the society of her mother. He congratulated himself upon the happy thought of supper in the ladies' room at his club. Mrs. Ruthven had accepted with an absence of demur that was flattering.

It was easy to like Gerald Ventnor, and he was a man of many friends. Nature had dealt with him generously. He was not perhaps remarkable for any very special attributes, and his type is one common enough amongst the class to which he belonged. Eton and Oxford had produced him, or at least had aided in his development, and a sound constitution and a more or less healthy mode of life had contributed to make him what he was. His features were sufficiently good. His skin was clear and

ruddy. His blue eyes looked straight at you, and had a certain baffling serenity. Something of the same nature was again suggested by his mouth. Miss Norfolk, who knew him well, said of him that you were never sure what he might or might not be thinking of you.

Mrs. Ruthven at this moment was feeling the perverse attraction of his placidity. She was accustomed to admiration and took it as her due. It was of course tiresome upon occasion, and she could have cited half a dozen instances of the truth of this amongst those of the young men whom from time to time she had annexed. There was Robin Wakefield, whom she had undertaken to cure of his attachment to a girl at home who had jilted him. He transferred his affection to her with alarming rapidity, and bored her beyond measure. There was Atty Carnac of the —th Lancers, who threatened to shoot himself, and ended by marrying the ugliest woman in Calcutta. There was young Kynaston, known in his regiment as Kitty, whose devotion took the form of a melancholy that began by being amusing, and became in time a weariness of the flesh. And there were several others. But Mrs. Ruthven was wishing that Gerald would appear a little less calm.

"I am wondering," she said suddenly and irrelevantly to anything that had been said before,

"I am wondering whether any one really knows you, Mr. Ventnor."

Gerald smiled inscrutably, and said quietly that perhaps there was nothing to know.

On his part, in his somewhat indolent way, Ventnor thought that Mrs. Ruthven was a very charming woman, and pretty enough to turn strong heads; but he did not wear his heart upon his sleeve. Moreover, there is a point at which interest passes the border-line of pleasant sensation, and further than this he had no intention, just then at any rate, of allowing his feelings to go.

This he decided quietly, to the accompaniment of the dainty dishes, the '80 champagne, and the sound of Mrs. Ruthven's voice. Her voice pleased his ear.

In the light of the candles the diamond necklace which she wore sparkled upon her white neck. Miss Norfolk, as one of a large family, was thinking that it was easy for Mrs. Ruthven to look well. She admitted, however, frankly that fine feathers were not by any means necessary to make Mrs. Ruthven a fine bird. She knew, moreover, upon which side of her bread butter was to be expected, and she also was thinking that her new acquaintance might prove a useful friend.

Miss Norfolk, you see, was eminently a girl of London, and she had no illusions. The gifts of to-day were always acceptable to her, and she

was prepared for more to-morrow. She was a good girl enough in its widest sense. She was not malicious. She was full of generous impulses, and if she valued people in proportion to the use which they might be to her, she was not alone in so doing.

Gerald, who knew her well enough to say pretty much what he liked, had said to her at the beginning of the evening,

"You see Hartford?"

"Which do you call Hartford?" was Miss Norfolk's question.

"That smart-looking little chap talking to Le Marchant. He has three or four thousand a year —not so bad, you know, in hard times. He has no relations. He is a friend of mine. Talk to him."

"Impertinent!" said Miss Norfolk at the time, smiling. But she made a mental note of the information.

Her thoughts ran somewhat in this wise——

"Mr. Hartford is not a bad little chap. I wish he were a little bit more like—like Mr. Ventnor, for example. How unhappy Mr. Ventnor might make a woman who was foolish enough to fall in love with him. I think Mrs. Ruthven is prettier than any one I ever saw. I think I shall like her. I know this sort of woman. She will give small dinner-parties, and she will be glad of unencumbered girls.

Thank goodness, mamma doesn't send us out in pairs. Mrs. Ruthven might be of the greatest use to me! Her daughter is ten times as good-looking as I am, but I don't fancy, somehow, that she would interfere much with any one."

Mrs. Ruthven was talking of her plans, and Miss Norfolk ceased speculating in order to listen. She accomplished the double feat of hearing all that the others were saying, and keeping up a conversation at the same time with Hartford.

"I am looking for a small furnished house, you know, or a flat, or something. Mrs. Sandon is very kindly putting me up till I get what I want. My husband's plans are so unsettled, that for the present I shall have to make my own arrangements."

"A small house?" said Ventnor.

"A small house," said Mrs. Ruthven. "It must be small, because, as there are only Araby and myself, I don't want the bother of a lot of servants."

Gerald thought he knew of such a house, and so the mischief, such as it was, began. Mrs. Sandon was unwittingly to blame for asking Gerald to dinner on this particular evening. Gerald's mother never forgave her, and said all sorts of things about her, some of which were repeated. This of course was later on when the house was taken, and the annexation of Gerald appeared complete.

The immediate result of the night's work which

began in Mrs. Sandon's dining-room in Earl Street, and was forwarded at the theatre and the club, was an appointment for the next day.

"Let us say at Castanet's in Bond Street," said Gerald. "My cousin's house is in Primate Street, Berkeley Square, and we can have chocolate at Castanet's before we go there."

Mrs. Ruthven agreed.

"You save me no end of trouble," she said. "I was dreading house-hunting."

After a while the ladies rose to go.

"Four o'clock to-morrow, then," said Gerald, forgetting for the moment the time of year as he put them into a hansom.

"Four o'clock," said Mrs. Ruthven, with the smile that had lingered painfully ere then in more than one chained memory.

Ventnor and Hartford went back into the club, and made their way to the smoking-room. Gerald called for cigars.

"What do you think of that for a pretty woman?" he said.

Now Mrs. Ruthven had taken small notice of Ventnor's friend; but, curiously enough (or perhaps, since human nature is perverse, for this very reason), it was on him that she had made the greater impression. While Miss Norfolk had aired her advanced ideas, his eyes had wandered again and

again to Mrs. Ruthven's face. He went home restless and Ventnor complacent.

Mrs. Ruthven, meanwhile, having left Miss Norfolk safely at home in Sloane Street, drove thence to Mrs. Sandon's.

The one trick which her thirty-seven years played her was that, allowing her to look twenty-eight till midnight, by lurking in good-natured ambush, after a long evening they occasionally came out thence, and asserted the fact of their existence. When Mrs. Ruthven looked into her glass that night before undressing, she saw that which scarcely pleased her. She had sent home directions to her maid not to sit up for her, and she was alone. She stood for a long time looking at herself. Then she left her room, and crossed the landing to another door. She opened it without knocking, and went in.

It was a bedroom. A fire was burning brightly in the grate, and the light of it flickered on the walls, and glittered on the silver and glass of the equipments of the dressing-table. The glow of the leaping flames lit up Araby's shining hair. Mrs. Ruthven approached the bed, and contemplated her daughter for some moments. The even fringe of the lashes outlined the curve of the closed eyelids; a delicate flush was on her face; the red lips were closed, and the gentle breath was drawn silently through the nostrils. A slender hand lay on the

coverlet, which rose and fell with the even movement of the bosom.

Perhaps a passing admiration, or a sudden instinct of affection came to Araby's mother as she stood there. She leant over the sleeping girl as if to kiss her, but at this moment Araby stirred. A flame leapt in the fire. The bright hair blazed with color. How smooth was the delicate skin, how smooth, and clear, and unworn, and young!

It was with a hand that expressed impatience that Mrs. Ruthven roused her daughter.

Araby gave a little cry, and woke.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked in a startled voice.

The firelight was very bright, and made her blink. She rubbed her eyes with her knuckles like a child.

"What should be the matter?" said her mother, shortly. "Sit up, please, while I speak to you, and listen to what I say."

Araby said, "Yes, mother," and obeyed. She pushed back the hair from her face.

"How absurdly like your father you are sometimes," said Mrs. Ruthven,—"irritatingly like him. Your hair is redder than his though, and I hate red hair. Well, don't look indignant."

"I didn't look indignant—" began Araby.

"Pardon me," said her mother, "you did. And

if you didn't I choose to say you did, so don't again. If you and I are to get on, you must learn not to contradict me."

Araby was silent, and Mrs. Ruthven smiled quietly to herself.

"Now you are cross," she said next.

"Indeed I am not," protested Araby.

"I say you are," said Mrs. Ruthven. ("Really," she added in parenthesis, "the color of your hair makes my eyes ache.) Well, I choose to say you are; it pleases me to think you are cross."

"Very well, I am cross," said Araby, with tears near her eyes.

"Now you are impudent," said her mother.

Mrs. Ruthven sat down on the edge of the bed. It was a curious thing perhaps, but a fact nevertheless, that she took a keen pleasure in teasing her daughter. Possibly the girl was easy to tease.

"I didn't mean—" Araby began.

But happily for her at this moment a little traveling clock that stood upon the mantelpiece struck, and reminded Mrs. Ruthven of the lateness of the hour.

"Never mind what you meant, dear, or did not mean," she said. "What I woke you to tell you was, that I don't want to be called in the morning. You must stop Olympe on her way to my door, so don't oversleep yourself."

"Very well, mother."

"And tell them to send up my breakfast when I ring. Make any civil apology you like, and don't be clumsy about it. Good-night."

"Good-night, mother."

Araby was asleep again in a few minutes, but Mrs. Ruthven lay awake for two hours.

CHAPTER III.

ARABY woke early, and was in time to catch Olympe.

Olympe was not exactly a soubrette. There was a good deal of her, though it was very neat and trim in its way. She was proud of her waist, which was small if only by contrast with the very ample proportions of such parts of her as, in the physical economy of her figure, were above and below it, and she had a trick of resting her hands upon her round hips in a way that showed its curves freely. She had a certain affection for powder, and her complexion did her credit, since she made it for herself. Olympe in the morning and Olympe in the evening were two different people, and Olympe dressed to go out was described by Mrs. Sandon as a duchess.

She had been in the service of Mrs. Ruthven for a year. The lady who had taken her out to India, and from whom the home-returning Mrs. Ruthven engaged her, said——

"She has eyes in the back of her head, and at the ends of her eight fingers and her two thumbs, and she has ears that defy walls; but she is invaluable,

and if she would only stay with me I would keep her for ever."

To Araby's recital of her mother's orders Olympe said——

"All aright. Oh whatta bore! I arise too soon. I get up at coq cro'. All in vain. Je ne ferai pas monter le déjeuner de madame avant neuf heures et demie. Voilà encore une heure. I might 'ave slept again 'alf an hour. Ah whatta pity! Madame enjoyed her evening? and mademoiselle aussi? That's right."

Olympe knew madame well. Those merry little black eyes of hers were very shrewd. She left the room smiling.

Mrs. Sandon's establishment was somewhat limited, and it chanced that Olympe, who could turn her hand to anything, had volunteered to assist in waiting at dinner on the preceding evening. She had thus seen something of the annexation of Gerald.

"Oh, I know something—me! I am not a mush-room born to-day. We go to supper. We sit up late. Alors ce matin we take a little rest. We see monsieur again to-day, I make a bet."

Araby herself scarcely looked younger than her mother when Mrs. Ruthven came down a little later on.

Mrs. Sandon was of that attractive type of

hostess that leaves her guests to amuse themselves instead of mapping out for them tedious diversions. It would not, here be it said, have been very easy to map out anything for Mrs. Ruthven against her will. She was an adept, she said of herself, at getting out of things. Mrs. Sandon asked her her plans.

"Well, we shan't be in for lunch," said her cousin, buttoning her gloves. "I am going to take Araby out to shop, and she must chaperon me to lunch at the Wellington."

Mrs. Sandon chuckled, and murmured something about the whole duty of daughters.

"Then I believe I have found a house. That nice boy who gave us supper last night has an aunt or something who wants to let hers in Primate Street. I am going to see it this afternoon."

Araby came into the room at this moment. She was dressed for walking. Her mother looked at her critically from her hat to her boots. She was wearing a dress of two shades of brown, against which the red of her hair struck a third brilliant note of color. The sense of harmony was complete; Mrs. Ruthven found herself admiring her daughter in spite of her prejudices.

The day was bright and clear; sunshine gilded London. There was a very blue sky, and the tops of the houses stood out against it clearly. Mrs.

Ruthven, with her throat nestling in soft fur, and a hat that looked very simple but that was in fact an elaborate creation, and threw a bewildering shadow over her eyes, was conscious that she was the prettiest woman in town, and accordingly was very gracious to Araby.

"I am not sure," she said, "I am not sure that you are not useful as a contrast. You have some good points. Your style is very good, Araby, and if you would only take the trouble to acquire a more —what shall I say?—a more twentieth century manner you would get on. Why didn't you talk last night? You allowed Miss Norfolk to monopolize Mr. Hartford; you must learn to be entertaining."

Araby flushed slightly.

"Would you wish me to be like Miss Norfolk?" she asked with a little hesitation.

"Why not?" said her mother. "A pleasant and sensible girl."

She stopped the hansom as she spoke, and the two ladies alighted opposite a jeweller's in Piccadilly. The window held an attractive array of silver cigarette cases and match-boxes. Mrs. Ruthven wished to buy a present for a friend in India. She professed herself enchanted with the silver cases on which, in bright enamels, were painted Sapphos, and ballet girls, and burlesque boys. Araby thought

them pretty too, but they did not interest her, and one or two of them seemed to her of questionable decency. She was learning, however, that she must hold her tongue and judge nothing.

While her mother bought her presents Araby's thoughts ran to Miss Norfolk, the pleasant and sensible girl who had been held up to her as a pattern. Possibly Araby's training had made her narrow. She was quite ready to admit that this might be so, and perhaps there was less that was wrong than she supposed in some of the daring remarks which she had overheard Miss Norfolk make to Hartford at the theatre. Araby scarcely yet understood a type that is in reality harmless, and that likes, nevertheless, to pretend to a knowledge of the seamy side of life. Miss Norfolk delighted in being a little outrageous, and the fact that she knew Araby was slightly shocked had not tended to make her modify her sentiments.

Araby thought of her country home. Eccram, where her dull and happy childhood had been passed, must be illumined to-day by this golden autumn sun. The trees must be gorgeous, yellow, orange, red. But Eccram was beautiful at all times; and Araby sighed as she thought of it. Her life there was monotonous, and in a certain sense cramped, but it had its quiet pleasures, and she missed its content.

She was attracted and repelled by the new life.

She was fascinated and frightened. She had been strictly brought up; now she found herself in a place where nothing was wrong, and where conscience was an inconvenience. As yet she was unable to affix a just value to anything. She was bewildered by a sense of inability to grasp the meaning of much that went on around her. She had had all sorts of ideas, which she was beginning to look upon as primitive. Amongst them had been the odd, not to say ridiculous, supposition, that marriage was the concentration of the affections upon one object. She tried vainly to adjust a balance between the standards of right and wrong which prevailed in the world she was entering, and her own preconceived notions of good and bad. And yet she had been taught, she supposed, what others too had learnt.

Of her mother she could only think with an overpowering wonder. She scarcely tried to understand her, so completely did Mrs. Ruthven seem beyond her comprehension in its present state. The early separation, and the subsequent living apart of the mother and daughter, had prevented any close exchange of affection. Yet, under like conditions, Araby felt that she knew her father far more intimately than she knew her mother. She had seen him, it was true, once since the first parting at Eccram, when both her parents had left her in the

care of the Miss Woottons. The impression which his kindness, during his short visit to England, made upon her was never forgotten, and in this of course Corbet Ruthven had the advantage of his wife. To Araby her father had a personality, her mother was a name. Mrs. Ruthven wrote constantly, but Araby always missed something in her letters which instinct told her should be there; and whatever it might be that her letters lacked, those of her father possessed in a degree that insisted upon comparison. Corbet's letters were short, informal, and without any pretension to style. They were irregular in their arrival, and sometimes they contained but a few words in answer perhaps to a question of his daughter's; still they bore unmistakably the evidence of an affection which distance could not blunt.

A thing that had often puzzled Araby at the time was the absence in them of allusions to her mother. Mrs. Ruthven wrote at precise intervals and often at some length. She had a plausible pen, and she could write all sorts of things that were beautiful in point of sentiment. Araby thought of the letter announcing the return to England. It contained many touching protestations. She remembered the time of waiting that succeeded it—a time full of anticipations and wonderings, fraught with a certain nervousness, which she tried in vain to allay. She remembered the throb of admiration and

pride with which she greeted the beautiful woman in whom she recognized her mother. Something chilled her in her mother's kiss.

The jewellery, the shopman, and the cigarette cases vanished; a dewy brightness was coming into Araby's eyes, when the sudden rising of Mrs. Ruthven, consequent upon the completion of her purchase, recalled her to the present. The final directions as to the sending of the parcel had been given.

"Come, Araby, I am waiting."

"Yes, mother."

"You weren't much help to me in choosing what I bought."

Araby scented danger.

"I didn't think you wanted me to help you, mother."

"You are always thinking or not thinking, Araby —another fault I have to find with you."

Araby said nothing. People looked at the two beautiful women as they passed, and no one who thought of it, guessed the relationship in which they stood to each other. Piccadilly was bright with color.

"Don't sulk, dear; it is not attractive."

"Mother, I am not sulking."

"And don't answer me," said Mrs. Ruthven; "it is like a servant."

Mrs. Ruthven after this continued to bait her

daughter for some twenty minutes, and to the verge of tears. Araby bore with her patiently. She was gentle by nature, and moreover, one of the things that she had learnt from the old aunts at Eccram was the duty of a child to its parents. So she walked beside her mother, doing her best to keep her temper, and succeeding in a way which, had she only known it, was the cause of her protracted torture. She was wondering whether her mother was cruel. She took an opportunity presently of looking at her. It was impossible to read cruelty in the unruffled good-humor of the face; Araby decided that at once. And yet those red lips could say words that stung. How very, very charming her mother looked in her soft furs, and how much Araby could have cared for her if she had been allowed!

"Don't stare, Araby; it is bad manners. Do you know that you have been wretchedly brought up? I shall be writing to those two dreadful old aunts of your father's, in a day or two, and I shall make a point of telling them what I think."

"Don't do that," said Araby, quickly. "They have been very good to me always. You know that, mother. They have done their best for me, and if you think I have turned out badly it isn't their fault. Oh, they were so good to me. When I was ill that time two years ago, they took it in turns to sit up with me, and Aunt Laura is not a

bit strong herself. You mustn't blame them for anything. . ."

Araby broke off. Her heart grew big at the thought of the old life, with its quiet happiness and its atmosphere of love. She could hear nothing that attacked Eccram.

"They never thought of themselves," she began, but her mother interrupted her.

"They spoilt you then," she said. "And now I know what it is—you are a spoilt child. And I hate spoilt children. And I shall write all the same. And you mustn't argue with me. And I want some gloves. I am going to take you through the Burlington Arcade, so don't look about you."

Then Araby found herself wondering whether her mother was not laughing in her sleeve. She could not tell. Perhaps it may have been the result of a meeting which took place at this moment, but for whatever reason, Mrs. Ruthven presently altered her manner, and was thenceforward enchanting, as she alone knew how to be, for the rest of the morning.

It was Hartford who was strolling disconsolately down the middle of the Arcade. His face brightened as his eyes caught those of Mrs. Ruthven. He turned about and walked with the two ladies to the glove shop. After his first smile of recognition he looked tragic and spoke bitterly. Possibly Mrs. Ruthven saw and knew the signs of her con-

quest. She asked him why he seemed unhappy. There was nothing, he answered, to make him seem anything else. In any case, what matter? Life was made up of unhappiness, and the happiest were those who caused most to others and who suffered least themselves.

But it did matter, said Mrs. Ruthven, laughing softly. And why did he speak in riddles? and why was he so bitter?

"How old are you, my good boy?"

He told her.

She laughed again.

"At your age to think life used up! To have weighed it all and found it wanting at twenty-four! Araby, if you want any gloves buy them now. Not? Very well. How much do they come to? You will be sure to send them to-day. No, that's all, thank you."

Hartford watched her as she put on once more her own glove. What a white hand it was. Her rings sparkled in the artificial light of the shop.

"Now I am ready," she said, as she folded up the bill and put it into her purse. "It is very nice of you not to be bored with my shopping, Mr. Hartford. Now Araby and I are going to lunch at the Wellington. The streets are so dry I think we'll walk. I don't believe you. You didn't look a bit when we met you as if you were intending to walk along Piccadilly."

"I intended nothing," said Hartford. "I had no aims. I have no aims. But if you will let me I should like to walk with you as far as the Wellington."

He cheered up somewhat in the course of the next few minutes, but he became sombre as the three approached their destination. At the door of the club Mrs. Ruthven held out her hand.

"You want a good talking to," she said, "and a great deal of good advice. When shall I give you both? I shall be at home to-morrow afternoon, if you like to come and see me."

He hesitated. His sister was passing through town, and he had promised to meet her and devote to her a couple of hours.

"Just as you like," said Mrs. Ruthven.

"You know which I should like," he said, hotly.

Mrs. Ruthven shrugged her shoulders. All gestures took a charm which was not their own when she employed them. They seemed too to acquire a new eloquence.

"At five then to-morrow," he said.

He raised his hat and went over to the Bachelors' to lunch, and to write to the sister who was to pass through London on the morrow, and who was counting upon a glimpse of her brother.

After all, he wrote, and he was awfully sorry, an unforeseen and pressing matter would prevent his

meeting her at Paddington. He would send his servant to see that she got a good hansom to take her over to Charing Cross. He was really very sorry, and he would try to run down home some time soon.

He drank a pint of champagne, perhaps as the result of his present frame of mind, for at lunch he was not in the habit of this extravagance, perhaps to shut out the persistent vision of his sister's eyes with tears in them.

CHAPTER IV.

Mrs Ruthven after lunch took Araby back to Earl Street. She sat for some time with her hostess. She had a delightful way of never coming in without having a good deal to tell, and she entertained Mrs. Sandon with an account of her morning.

"But I won't have you making my pet young men unhappy," said Mrs. Sandon with her chuckle.

Mrs. Ruthven laughed merrily.

"And now I suppose you mean to try your powers upon Gerald Ventnor?" said Mrs. Sandon. "Johnnie, dear, I disapprove of you dreadfully."

"But you rather like me," said Mrs. Ruthven.

"And very much against my better judgment," said Mrs. Sandon.

Mrs. Ruthven kissed her, and rang for a hansom, in which when it arrived she set out for Bond Street.

"She will burn her fingers yet," said Mrs. Sandon to herself, as she heard the wheels roll away. Then she bethought her of Araby, for whom she was really in a manner sorry.

"I am afraid for them both," she thought, shaking her head.

Her way of being kind to her friends was to introduce them to smart people. Accordingly, she told Araby that she was going to take her out driving with her, and Araby had a kindly and dull afternoon of stately visits. In the course of these she made the acquaintance of Lady Ventnor, mother to Gerald of that ilk. Lady Ventnor disapproved of girls, only less keenly than she disapproved of young married women. She was, Mrs. Sandon averred, in a perpetual state of apprehension lest her son should entangle himself.

"And it is my one large endeavor to alarm her," the old lady said afterwards. "That's why I asked him to dinner to meet your mother. She is not exactly a young woman, but she is dangerous for all that. I wonder what Lady Ventnor would have said if she had known that her boy was now at Castanet's with the prettiest woman in London."

The shop presented its usual gay appearance. The window held a bright array of cases in costly device for holding every form of delicate bonbon. Pink was for the day the prevailing color. Mandolins tied with pink ribbons were cunning receptacles for the most recent form of chocolate nougat or burnt almond.

Gerald Ventnor was standing a few yards from the door when Mrs. Ruthven's hansom drew up. He was talking to the great dog that sprawled on the threshold of an adjacent milliner's.

Mrs. Ruthven saw him before he saw her, and while she was still unobserved she gave him a quick glance of critical approval; and, in truth, he looked fresh and neat and smart in a way that was essentially English.

He raised his head and saw her.

"I haven't kept you waiting?" she asked.

"You are punctual. I was before my time."

They entered the shop. Some sugar violets caught Mrs. Ruthven's attention, and she asked him whether they did not look as real and Neapolitan as those that she was wearing. No. Not that table. There—that one at the end.

Ventnor followed her as she threaded her way between the chairs and tables to the place she had chosen. He felt a certain complacent pride in her beauty as he saw how people nudged each other as she passed.

An attendant poured chocolate into minute cups. Gerald looked with amusement at the brown liquid which he hated, but which in the present instance had its use as a pretext for half an hour's amusement.

Mrs. Ruthven had singled out an old woman, glaringly made up and dressed with an outrageous disregard of her age, who was fumbling with trembling fingers for a coin in her purse. As she turned away Mrs. Ruthven met Gerald's look of inquiry.

"That is what I shall come to some day," she said, with a shudder. She felt as if she had looked on death.

Nonsense," said Ventnor, cheerfully. Mrs. Ruthven was to him as old as she looked, and that was considerably under thirty. He did not remember Araby at the moment, but Mrs. Ruthven remembered her. Araby was to her the outward and visible sign of many things that she would have liked to forget. But the mood did not last. Mrs. Ruthven caught sight of her face in a mirror, and she was re-assured. Years are long, and age was still a great way off. The thought too of Hartford's recent restlessness contributed at this moment to remind her that her charm was potent as ever. After all, if Araby had not existed——

"You met Hartford this morning," Gerald said, interrupting her thoughts.

"How do you know that?"

"I left him half an hour ago at the club. He's an odd chap—moody, uncertain. He has no troubles except those he makes for himself, and he is rather good at making them."

Gerald was smiling.

"What sort of troubles?"

"Love," said Ventnor. He put down his empty cup, and wondered why he drank chocolate when he did not care for it.

Mrs. Ruthven looked at him inquiringly. Incidentally, she noted a small scar on his face. It was just below his left eye, and it was the result of a fall in the hunting-field.

"The odd part of it is," he said presently, still smiling meditatively, "that his experiences teach him no wisdom. He falls in love perhaps three times in a year—seriously. All his heart affairs are serious. They take him differently at different times. He will be silent, or he will talk bitterly of everything, till all's blue. He suffers acutely while the fit is on him. His life is full of one person for the time being—full, I tell you. He knows that a month later he may be feeling all the same things for and about some one else, but while he is under the spell of any particular woman she could make him do anything."

"He is as tractable as all that?"

"He is absolutely tractable. He is like the lover in the fairy story, who is willing to perform any task an exacting mistress may choose to set him. You remember the sort of thing one used to read—'Before I can marry you, said the Princess, you must bring me the wishing flower, which blooms at moonrise on the glass mountain, which is guarded day and night by the dragon of the sleepless eye.' Hartford would be off like a shot."

Mrs. Ruthven made a mental note of this trait

in Hartford's character. It did not occur to her just then that it was at all probable that it could ever be of use to her, but she remembered it for all that.

"Let us go and see the house," she said.

"No; let us sit on here for a little while."

"Very well; tell me something more about your friend."

"You take a great interest in him. I don't know any more."

People came and went. The attendants moved deftly to and fro. There was a hum of talk, and the occasional sound of the pouring of almonds or caramels into the brass bowl of a scale. The little French maid swung the door open and shut.

"We can't sit here any longer," said Mrs. Ruthven, presently. "Come, let us go and see the house."

The autumn afternoon had begun to close in. Lights on cabs and carriages flashed past in Bond Street.

"Why, it is nearly dark," said Mrs. Ruthven. "I forgot that it would be dark. Why didn't you remind me?"

"I didn't think of it at the time," Gerald confessed, "and afterwards—"

"Well—afterwards?"

"It is too late to go now, anyway," he said, "isn't

it? You ought to see it in the day-time, oughtn't you? You can't see a house comfortably in the dark. It is a thing to do in the morning. I ought to be kicked, oughtn't I?"

"I think so," said Mrs. Ruthven.

He followed her into the street.

"Then to-morrow morning," he said; "have you anything to do to-morrow morning? Will you come then?"

"It is partly my own fault," said Mrs. Ruthven, "or I think I should be angry with you."

"But I am contrite," said Gerald, "and I want you to forgive me. I honestly forgot at the time, and when I thought of telegraphing, I saw a way of doubling a pleasure, and I gave way to the temptation. No, you don't want a hansom yet. Let us go and see some pictures, in token that you bear me no malice. What is there? Let us go into the first gallery we come to."

They began to walk down the street. She was in truth nothing loth to know that she should see him the next day.

"You will come to-morrow?"

"I will go to-morrow."

"You are not angry?"

"No."

The visit to the gallery was not quite successful. It chanced that Mrs. Sandon, having come to an end

of her cards, had proposed to show Araby some pictures. Araby had seen nothing, and was delighted. There was a picture of note at the gallery which Gerald and Mrs. Ruthven had happened to enter.

CHAPTER V.

Mrs. Ruthven established herself in Primate Street. The house, with the usual drawbacks, was as nearly as possible the sort of house she was seeking, and matters were quickly arranged. Gerald Ventnor's cousin bounced off in high glee to Cannes or Mentone, and Lady Ventnor raised her eyebrows and said to her daughter—

"Who is this Mrs. Ruthven who has taken Audrey's house?"

Miss Ventnor, it happened, shared Mrs. Sandon's delight in causing Lady Ventnor alarm on Gerald's account, so she said—

"The mother of that very lovely girl with the sunset hair who came here one day with Mrs. Sandon. But Gerald can tell you more. They are his friends. He speaks of Mrs. Ruthven as one of the most charming women he has ever seen."

"I never like Mrs. Sandon's friends," said Lady Ventnor. "I don't know what it is about her, but I never quite trust that woman."

"That woman," said Miss Ventnor, with Gerald's smile.

"Well, you know, her mother," began Lady Ventnor, "was one of those——"

"Which isn't true," said Miss Ventnor, averting a little tale of scandal. "The whole story was contradicted, and in any case you were glad enough to make friends with them and secure their interest for papa when he first stood for the Lecton division of Midlandshire, and they lived in the county."

"My dear, that was a political matter."

"Gerald's going to take me to see Mrs. Ruthven," said Miss Ventnor. "He says she is delightful to girls if she likes them. He goes there every day himself, and I really believe that is what is keeping him in town. He says of course that he can't hunt till the alterations in the stables at home are finished, but *I* think—"

"What do you think?"

"Well, he goes to Primate Street every day. I wonder which he goes to see, Mrs. Ruthven or her daughter. They are both apparently the same age."

Lady Ventnor had a fearful quarter of an hour, and when a visitor during the course of the afternoon happened casually to mention Mrs. Ruthven's name in connection with that of Gerald, Lady Ventnor, to her daughter's keen amusement, said something about not being acquainted with Mrs.—er—Ruthven, a friend, she understood, of Mrs. Sandon, whom she therewith began to abuse.

Mrs. Sandon in course of time heard much of what Lady Ventnor said, and it made her chuckle, whenever she thought of it, off and on for a week.

The few months that had followed directly upon Mrs. Ruthven's return from India had been spent in visits with her daughter to friends and relations in the country and London, consequently it was now that Araby was having her first real experience of her mother's unrelieved society. Less than ever did she understand the brilliant woman to whom she was so nearly related.

Araby's chief sensation was one of loneliness. Not that the house in Primate Street was ever empty; a constant succession of visitors filled the drawing-room. Friends of Mrs. Sandon called, and these were many, friends and relations of Mrs. Ruthven herself, and others. Mrs. Ruthven dined out constantly, and Araby, who was not to be presented till the spring, was left much to herself. A girl whose instincts were less affectionate would have suffered less. She longed for her father in these days, and she looked on into the future with dread. The return of her mother was, she told herself, the beginning of sorrows. She began to understand something perhaps of the state of affairs that existed between her parents, and this did not tend to make her happier.

Mrs. Ruthven collected young men as a stone

gathers moss. They sprung from everywhere. Some of these were attentive to Araby, but she was reserved just then and unresponsive.

So passed November and December. Mrs. Ruthven had reached England in August.

Mrs. Sandon watched Primate Street with amusement, but with fear also.

"You can't reason with Johnnie," she said to herself. "I have a sort of idea that Araby ought to be taken away from her, but what can one do? I have an uncomfortable feeling that where the girl is concerned Johnnie is absolutely unscrupulous. I am horribly afraid of Araby being somehow sacrificed. I don't know a bit in what way or why. I am apprehensive—just that, apprehensive."

Mrs. Ruthven meanwhile, in her irresponsible way, was uncertain as a barometer. One day she made herself so delightful to her daughter that Araby herself began to hope for the future; the next nothing satisfied her. And Araby, so far as she knew, was blameless. In a hundred small ways she tried to please her mother, and she failed.

"You are so aggressively unlike me," Mrs. Ruthven said one day. "There is no chance of my ever getting to care for you, except by fits and starts. Perhaps you may say that I am not the sort of woman who ever does like girls. You are quite impudent enough to say so."

She paused for Araby to protest, as at one time, and before she had learnt a certain wisdom, she would have protested, but Araby was silent.

"But you are wrong," Mrs. Ruthven continued, impatient that her assertion should not have evoked a contradiction. "You are wrong, as you are about most things that concern your mother. I like some girls very much. And I can tell you that girls adore me. I see you don't believe me, but it is true. They look up to me. The only thing for it will be for me to marry you early—if I can. You will have to accept the first man who makes you an offer, Araby. I don't care who he is, you will have to marry him."

Araby's laugh had a shade of defiance.

"I see nothing to laugh at," her mother said, with a grave mouth but with twinkling eyes that upset Araby's theories. Mrs. Ruthven was inscrutable upon occasion as the Sphinx or Gerald himself, and withal she was made up of contradictions to a degree that was bewildering. "Nothing on earth to laugh at," she continued; "you may never get one at all. Men don't admire you, and your flaring hair will probably warn a good many off."

"Mr. Ventnor," said Araby, quietly, "said my hair reminded him of Romney's Lady Hamilton."

"I know he pretends to admire it," said Mrs. Ruthven, "and it is really very good-natured of him. Well, a few people may like it. It isn't jealousy, dear; it makes my eyes ache."

But Araby could see for herself the value of her own brilliance of coloring, and on this point her mother could not wound her.

"If you don't marry in a year," said Mrs. Ruthven, "I think I shall send you out to India; I think I shall have done my share by that time, and your father will have to take his turn. He shirks all his responsibilities. What's that you say?"

"I said 'Poor father!'" said Araby.

"Go to your own room." Mrs. Ruthven's eyes did not twinkle. "Go to your own room, and don't come down till I give you leave."

Araby, goaded to anger, had it on the tip of her tongue to remind Mrs. Ruthven that her daughter was no longer a child. But the vengeance would have been too exquisite, and Araby thought better of it. She selected a book to take with her.

"Put that down!" said her mother.

Araby hesitated, and—obeyed.

"You are not to do anything. You are to sit with your hands in your lap, till you are in a better frame of mind."

Araby left the room. Her lips trembled with her just rage, but she did not slam the door, as Mrs. Ruthven hoped.

On the landing, a square white place, with miniature pillars and yellow silk hangings Araby met Ventnor. He was, as we know, a constant visitor

in Primate Street, and he came up sometimes without being announced. There was nothing to mark this chance meeting, yet each afterwards attached to it a curious importance. It was as if the eyes of both were opened. Araby, who had seen him a hundred times, thought that she had never before quite known what he was like; and he for the first time was struck with her beauty. The recent passage at arms had heightened the pink in her cheeks, and her eyes were sparkling.

He shook hands with her. She was going to pass on, but he stopped her.

"Why do you run away?"

She laughed softly. She had a musical laugh. He detected in it a curious ring.

"It isn't polite, you know, to run away the minute I arrive. Come back into the drawing-room. Is Mrs. Ruthven there?"

"Yes, mother is there. But I won't go back."

"Why not?"

He wished to detain her. He wondered that she had not impressed him before. What bright eyes she had! How fine and delicate and fresh was her skin!

"Why not?"

"Because—"

She was half inclined to tell him. After all, it was so very ridiculous. Her mother deserved that he should be told.

But instead she laughed again, shook her head, and left him. He watched her as she bounded lightly up the narrow white stairs.

Mrs. Ruthven hailed his appearance with manifest delight. She was a woman who could not bear to be alone. She was bored, and she was already regretting having sent Araby away, and so deprived herself of the pleasure of teasing her.

"Oh, it is so dull," she said, "so appallingly dull. I was wondering how I should get through the rest of the day. I was on the point of ringing for Olympe to come and talk to me. She can be entertaining when she chooses. I am so glad you came in. What are you doing to-night? Nothing? Really! Then do let us devise some amusement. I was going to Mrs. Sandon, but she has a cold, and has put me off. Will you dine here? I wonder whether I could get any one else at a few hours' notice. Where would a telegram find Mr. Hartford?"

"I left him at the club an hour ago," said Ventnor.

"The Bachelors? Bring me some of the forms you will see on that writing-table. I'll ask the Norfolk girl on chance. Where shall we go? The Gaiety? Yes, the Gaiety if we can get seats. I'll telegraph at once. Ring the bell, please. It had better be a box, as I don't know how many we may be."

The messages were despatched. Then Gerald and Mrs. Ruthven sat by the fire, and talked for an hour.

Araby, meanwhile, having recovered her good humor, was sitting comfortably by her own hearth and discussing the world in general with Olympe. Olympe had opinions, and she aired them. She was cynical. All men and most women she thought were deceivers, and she said so in French and English. She had a way of translating herself from the one to the other. She had had a love-affair in her early youth, and she knew what she was talking about.

"J'en ai assez. I have enough. I want no more. Never again—not me. No fear. Pas si bête. Not so stupid."

A knock made itself heard. Mrs. Ruthven desired Miss Araby's presence in the drawing-room.

Araby was received as if nothing had happened. This was another of those things which puzzled her. Mrs. Ruthven chose to ignore all that had gone before.

"Life is too short," she said to Araby one day, "to make it worth while to keep up one's resentment. If you annoy me in any way, either apologize at the time or not at all. I never wish to be reminded of anything that is over. If I want to be angry with you I shall soon find a fresh opportunity, so let the old score slide."

Upon her daughter's appearance Mrs. Ruthven said something playful about Araby's afternoon sleep. Araby looked into the fire and smiled to herself. A dancing flame caught the gold in her hair, and Gerald found himself noting it.

"Go and sing," said Mrs. Ruthven suddenly. She pointed to the piano.

Araby, accustomed to obeying, rose. Gerald opened the instrument for her.

"What shall I sing?"

"*Home, sweet Home,*" said Mrs. Ruthven. "I think that is sufficiently—inappropriate."

Ventnor looked round. Mrs. Ruthven was laughing softly at her own thoughts. Araby began to sing. Her voice was sweet, and though it was quite untrained, she used it with a very fair method. Gerald found himself thinking of an abstract home. It held—not Lady Ventnor.

In the firelight of the room (Araby's music needed no candles, and the lamps had not yet been brought in) he looked at the straight and slender form at the piano, the gentle hands, the parted lips, and the earnest face—it was childish and pathetic—and the hair of flame.

The girl was very beautiful, he thought, and he had only just discovered it.

"Now sing *Molly Bawn.*"

But Araby was thinking of Eccram, of the dull

happy days, of the two old aunts who loved her. Something new in Gerald's manner unnerved her.

"Not now," she said, a little huskily, and with glistening eyes. "I will play something instead."

Soon after this a couple of telegrams arrived simultaneously, and were brought to Mrs. Ruthven. They contained respectively the acceptances of her invitations to Hartford and Miss Norfolk.

"What shall we do if we can't get places?" said Mrs. Ruthven. "I ought to have had an answer from the theatre by this time."

Ten minutes later a third yellow envelope was brought to her.

"There isn't a box," she said, when she had torn it open and read the contents. "I can have four stalls together, and one in another row."

She thought for a few moments.

"I am afraid you will have to amuse yourself at home, Araby."

Gerald's eyeglass sent a gleam of reflected firelight across the wall as the wearer of it turned in the direction of the speaker.

"May I go with Olympe to the St. James's Hall?" said Araby, after a pause.

She mentioned a singer she wished to hear. She was not disappointed in reality though she was sure that Gerald thought her so, and it was with an effort that she made her voice sound unstrained. Mrs.

Ruthven was writing her telegram engaging the four places.

"But there are five stalls," said Ventnor, "and we are five."

"And one of you would have to sit out by himself," said Mrs. Ruthven, shaking her head. "No, that sort of arrangement is most uncomfortable. Araby must be content not to come. It can't be helped."

She rang as she spoke, and gave the message to the servant as soon as he appeared, directing that it should be despatched forthwith.

"Still it is rather rough on Miss Ruthven," said Gerald, in a tone of half-serious and half-playful remonstrance.

Araby wished that he would understand that she did not mind.

"Yes, upon my word it is too bad," he said, less playfully, as if he realized more fully the leaving out of Araby from the plan of the evening's amusement. He rose to his feet. "Let me stop him. Look here, let us have that fifth stall. I'll sit in it."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Mr. Ventnor. The telegram is gone. Araby doesn't care for a burlesque; she doesn't understand it. And anyway she is young enough to be able to do without diversion for one night."

Gerald sat down again unconvinced. Araby

looked at her mother and feared a storm. Mrs. Ruthven appeared unruffled, but Araby thought she was angry.

"And I think I would almost rather go to the concert," Araby said. She glanced at Gerald then, hoping to silence him.

Mrs. Ruthven, though for no particular reason, unless indeed she was annoyed by Ventnor's attitude, had it on her tongue to refuse. She thought better of it, however, and gave a conditional consent.

"If," she said, "I don't change my mind, and if Olympe can be got to look sufficiently respectable—Olympe paints her face, and tires her head, and is altogether rather like Jezebel—you can go."

Then Gerald went home to dress.

Ventnor led the way where the cab was standing.

CHAPTER VI.

WHATEVER may have been the impression which Araby made upon Gerald Ventnor that afternoon, it was Mrs. Ruthven who absorbed his attention at dinner. Her attraction appealed always to the senses, and her brilliance eclipsed the less assertive charms of Araby and Miss Norfolk.

Miss Norfolk, it is true, had no very strong claim to good looks. She had the prettiness of a thousand London girls who keep their eyes open, and are on the alert to note the smallest change of fashion. She had a reputation for a certain smartness of dress, and she did her level best to maintain it. Her friends would have been astonished to know upon how limited an allowance she produced such good effects. Indeed, it would have opened a good many eyes, had the figures that represented the entire income that was made to meet the expenses of the house in Sloane Street been known. Mrs. Norfolk knew that a good address, with six marriageable girls of moderate charms but sufficient wits, was a not unprofitable speculation. They had the start of living in a good neighbor-

hood, and she gave them such advantages as lay in her managing power, and let them do the rest for themselves. Miss Norfolk and her five sisters spent then a certain number of hours each week in the workroom at the top of the house, in company with a maid, a couple of large pairs of scissors, and a sewing machine. They were clever girls, and they made the most of an abundant stock of ideas, and the least possible amount of such materials as were expensive. The result of their diligence, their observation, and what the maid called their contrivance, was that Mrs. Norfolk's girls were better turned out than two-thirds of those of her friends, whose incomes doubled or trebled her own.

Miss Norfolk looked at Mrs. Ruthven, and thought of herself, that for to-night at least she was somewhat unfairly handicapped.

"I wonder whether I am asked here for foil," she thought, suddenly pausing in eating her soup. "Mrs. Ruthven is too good-looking to give one a chance. She is like electric light; and I feel like the flame of a candle."

Miss Norfolk, however, went on to reflect, that but for Mrs. Ruthven she would be at that moment dining at home on roast mutton and rice-pudding, and with a dull evening before her of helping a sister trim a hat. So she ate her soup like a good girl, and was thankful for these and other mercies.

Araby did not mind being eclipsed. But there was something that she did mind, and for the first time. Miss Norfolk found Hartford rather silent. She saw that he could not keep his eyes from the end of the table.

"He shall though," she said to herself, and in twenty minutes, and possibly with the unconscious aid of Mrs. Ruthven's excellent champagne, which he was drinking pretty freely, she had the satisfaction of securing his attention.

"All the same," she told him, "you are awfully dull—dull, but dull! dull to break everything!"

"I know," he said, "I am shocking bad company to-night. It is very good of you to put up with me at all."

"Well, you see, I have to put up with you," said Miss Norfolk, boldly; "there is no one else. Those two manage to amuse themselves pretty well, don't they? I wonder what they are talking about? Wait a minute, I must say something to Miss Ruthven. You won't go off into a brown study in the meantime, will you? Mr. Hartford and I are admiring the flowers, Miss Ruthven. I am sure you settled them, didn't you? I thought so. I wish I had your happy knack. I always see to ours at home, but I never can get the table to look half as nice as this. It is quite lovely—quite lovely—too lovely!"

Araby saw that Miss Norfolk was not thinking of what she was saying, so she did not respond much, and Miss Norfolk having murmured "quite too lovely" three or four times under her breath with palpable mechanicalness returned to the conquest of Hartford.

Dinner proceeded smoothly, and with that absence of delays that means good service, which in turn implies good wages. Mrs. Ruthven, while she exacted the utmost attention to her orders, managed always to keep on good terms with her servants, and the result was comfort and freedom from small annoyances. The butler and a smart maid moved with noiseless tread and mutual silent understanding. The menu itself was short and unelaborate, but each dish was perfect of its kind.

Araby, sitting between the girl of the end of the century and Gerald Ventnor, had time to think a good deal.

Mrs. Ruthven's laugh sounded often. Her boredom of the earlier part of the day was gone, and her spirits had risen in proportion. She seemed not ill-disposed towards her daughter, to whom she addressed an occasional remark. Perhaps she saw that her possession of Gerald was to-night more complete than it had been heretofore, and she could afford the optimism which extended its goodwill even to Araby.

Dinner approached its end. Araby looked at the clock; she made her excuses and rose. Gerald, with a sudden misgiving, realized how he had neglected one of his neighbors for the other. Araby's smile of thanks was a little wistful as he held the door open for her. It lingered in his memory afterwards.

Miss Norfolk carried on her plan of campaign. She was very wide awake, and she began to praise her hostess. Hartford was transparent to her as glass.

It was with some difficulty that Mrs. Ruthven caught her eye. Miss Norfolk's face bore the nearest approach to a blush of which it was capable, when she found Mrs. Ruthven looking at her in silent but eloquent amusement, and waiting.

"We mustn't delay any longer," Mrs. Ruthven said, smiling, "and we must have our coffee at once and go. Ring for it, Mr. Ventnor."

Ten minutes later a brougham and a hansom left Primate Street.

In the clear and frosty night the buildings cut themselves sharply against the sky. There were many stars. Gerald, in the hansom with Hartford, felt a sudden wish for the country, and a momentary revolt against London. With it, and with or without reason, came a thought of Araby. How he had neglected her. He liked to think that she was going to hear beautiful music.

Then his cigar, and the glamor of the starlit sky that had made him wish for the country, caused London to absorb him once more. It was an enchanted city under such a sky. He saw tiny points of frost sparkling on the ground under a lamp. Shadows were vague and mysterious. Lights on cabs and carriages looked in the distance like large fireflies. Trafalgar Square was powdered with a fine snow that had fallen at sundown, and that lay softly on the lions and the steps. He was sure that the trees in the parks must be white with it and rime. Oh, enchanted city! Were the buildings of silver as they looked on such a night? He wished that he could be on the top of St. Paul's, that he might look down upon the whitened roofs and streets, upon the moonlit walls and churches and chimneys, and river and bridges and wharves. He said "Beautiful! Wonderful!" below his breath. They were the first words he had spoken since he left Primate Street.

Hartford assented. He was thinking perhaps of Mrs. Ruthven. The two men had been smoking in silence.

The hansom turned into the Strand. This the subtle beauty of the night could not enchant. It must remain ugly, but not without interest. It was thronged as ever with people and vehicles. It gave forth its roar of life and motion. Here and there

the theatres illuminated a bit of the road. From the bowls of fire on Terry's the flames licked the sky.

The cab drew up a few moments later. Ventnor and Hartford jumped out, and waited for the arrival of the brougham containing Mrs. Ruthven and Miss Norfolk.

The four stalls turned out to be well placed. Ventnor looked about, and wondered which was the seat in another row which he associated with the absence of Araby. He felt somehow as if she must be sitting there all by herself, and again he thought of how at dinner he had neglected her. His thoughts ran back too to another night when she had been left out of part of the plan of the evening's amusement. He looked at Mrs. Ruthven. She met his eyes by chance and smiled, and he ceased to think of Araby.

Then the curtain rose to a swinging chorus, and he gave himself up to the enjoyment of a thing that needed no mental exertion of thought. Pretty faces, shapely limbs, and gorgeous and beautiful colors chained his eyes. Light melodies filled his ears. The jokes were not all funny, but mirth is as infectious as a cold. He laughed quietly, often at nothing. The play was like champagne; it sparkled, and each sparkle was a tiny bubble dancing to the surface, and the bubble was only a speck of

empty air. But like champagne, it intoxicated. The players were a pack of children romping through a game. They seemed all full of the delight of their life. Something that was irresponsible, as the flight of a butterfly on a midsummer's day, pervaded the atmosphere of that region of light and sound and movement and color on the other side of the footlights. Wonderful and daring combinations of tints gave a dazzling effect to the swaying skirts of the dancing girls. Their arms waved with exquisite precision as their bodies undulated in the tangle of the dance. Their eyes glistened, and they smiled, and their teeth gleamed through their red lips. Here and there amongst the audience a foot tapped in time to the exuberant measures of an air that was not to be resisted. Ribbons white, and black, and blue, and scarlet, and green, floated out from the dresses of the dancers, and followed with zig-zag or curved flutterings the movements of their bodies. The house was full—even Araby's stall had been taken.

Gerald, though he did not know which that fifth stall was, saw presently that not one was vacant, and deduced from the fact this conclusion. Once more he thought of Araby, and his conscience pricked him. A girl in the chorus had red hair that reminded him vaguely of hers. Then he thought of her soft eyes, and then—he was listening to a voice

that never failed to please him, and he forgot her. The words of the song, which were in kind a eulogy of fickleness, had a perverse charm of their own; and the air, written to display to their greatest advantage the deep and the high notes of the singer, was full of subtle contrasts. There was midway through each verse the sudden surprise of a change of key. And from thinking of Araby's soft eyes he fell to noting the dancing eyes of the singer, and the play of expression on the laughing face. He sought to define its charm. An encore was demanded and conceded. The chorus romped in. Some sort of a climax was attained, and the curtain fell on the end of an act.

Gerald and Mrs. Ruthven began to talk. Miss Norfolk chattered to Hartford, and he listened more or less. People moved about and exchanged greetings and remarks with their acquaintance. A man in the stalls talked to a girl in one of the boxes on the lower tier. A woman nodded and smiled to another across the house. There was a steady hum of talk. A girl's laugh sounded softly. A word or two of conversation might now and then be heard, detached as it were from the general buzz. There was that appearance of the meeting and the mutual recognition of members of a set that denotes the successful theatre. Miss Norfolk bowing now and then to

friends was happy in the knowledge that she was generally to be seen somewhere. Any one, to be sure, can go to a theatre, but Miss Norfolk knew that since sufficient smart doors were open to her it was just as well to be in evidence even where no special *cachet* secured admittance. Her views were summed up briefly in the words, *Il faut se montrer,* which may have been vulgar, but life is vulgar, and Miss Norfolk did not aspire to fine feelings.

Hartford looked across the girl of the end of the age at Mrs. Ruthven. Gerald, noting the direction of his eyes, felt a certain satisfaction in the fact of the lady's attitude towards himself. He was more interested in her to-night than heretofore. Possibly Hartford's infatuation may have influenced him. That which another covets takes sometimes an attraction for oneself.

Mrs. Ruthven surprised Hartford's eyes on her own. It was then that a sudden idea occurred to her, and she decided that it was time for Ventnor to change places with him.

"Go and talk to Miss Norfolk," she whispered to Gerald; "I dare say she will teach you a good deal that you don't know." She leant over towards Hartford. "Mr. Hartford, come and sit by me. I have scarcely seen anything of you all this evening."

Hartford rose with an alacrity that was scarcely flattering to the girl of the end of the century.

"You haven't been particularly kind to me to-night," he said, as he took the place Ventnor had vacated.

Mrs. Ruthven looked puzzled and innocent.

"I gave you the only girl," she said. "I thought of course you would rather talk to her than to an old married woman like myself."

"That's nonsense," said Hartford hotly, "you know that."

"Are you going to be cross and horrible?" said Mrs. Ruthven, "because if so I shan't like you."

"You don't like me."

"Yes, I do. You interest me—very much, when you are not disagreeable."

Hartford did not relax. He looked gloomily at the musicians assembling.

"Mr. Hartford."

"Yes, Mrs. Ruthven."

"Look here. No, turn round. Look me in the face. Like that. Now, why are you angry?"

"I am not angry."

"Yes, you are. Well, I am going to be very humble. If I have offended you I—I am sorry. I don't like to see you looking unhappy. Yes, it does matter, of course it matters. I am ready to make amends if you will tell me how. There, you look much nicer when you smile."

The musicians were in their places. There was

a confused noise of tuning. A 'cello complained deeply. A violin gave forth a sound that was like a dog yawning. An oboe wailed. The conductor made his appearance and took his seat.

"London is ruining you," she said presently. "It is the very worst place for you in the world. Why haven't you a profession?"

"Because I am lazy, and I have enough to live on without."

"You are an only son?"

The conductor tapped the music-stand with his baton. There was silence amongst the wantoning instruments, and the overture to the second act began.

A few tactful inquiries elicited some further information of a character interesting to Mrs. Ruthven with regard to the possibility of realizing the sudden idea which had occurred to her.

"I know you," she said gravely; "oh, I have seen heaps of men like you in India. You drift. You make a profession of drifting. Do you know that you are very foolish?"

"I know that I am not very happy."

The violins in sweeping waves of sound helped perhaps to unsteady a head that was not at the best very strong.

Gerald meanwhile talked lightly to Miss Norfolk. Presently the lights were lowered and the curtain rose.

What matter that the plot had gone to pieces, that the disguises were somewhat bewildering, and without motive? What did the story matter while there was still to be heard the voice that had sung perversely to Fickleness, and to be seen the feet that had translated music to movement? These things never failed to put Gerald on good terms with the world and himself. Give us Ibsen, he said, and plays that make us think, but give us also plays that don't; oh, above all plays that don't! Give us Milton, but give us Austin Dobson; give us Raphael and Titian, and give us Harry Furniss! Make us uncomfortable, awe us, impress us, but let us also laugh—especially laugh!

Watteau, out of the heaviness of his heart and the unhappiness of his thirty-seven years, understood, and left us his *fetes galantes*. He knew that life was full enough of depression and disease and death, and so he presented to us a life that knew not these things, but that was made up of love, and sunshine, and color, and laughter, and beauty. Poor Watteau—yet happy Watteau to have understood so well!

Now the stage was clear, and there came on a dancer lighter and more supple than the rest. To see her was to know where the performance of the lesser dancers had fallen short of perfectness. The restraint and control of her movements were admi-

rable. The dazzling ray of white light that was directed upon her threw her swaying shadow darkly on to the boards. The laws of balance and gravitation seemed suspended for her. To her feet, with the arched insteps, the intricacies of the plan of the dance offered no apparent difficulties. The marvelous ease with which she executed it was perhaps its greatest charm. When she raised her foot her skirts swung upwards after it, and looked like the sea foam that curls on the crest of a conventional wave in an old print, and then swung back to swing out afresh in some new direction. She glided here and there noiselessly, she turned as smoothly as smoke that wreathes in circles. The dance was full of small conceits, as when with her handkerchief she flicked lightly her pointed shoe, which fell back as if in answer, like some mouse peeping forth, detected and scared away; or when she swept softly round the stage, giving with her arm a curved motion as of reaping. And after that she seemed to glean; and then, in the last movement of the gavotte, when the violins, pizzicato, gave out sharp separate notes, it seemed, so exactly did her steps touch each one, as if she might have been dancing upon the strings themselves.

The peal of applause that greeted the end of the dance resulted in its repetition. Then the chorus romped in once more, like the letting loose of chil-

dren from school, which in turn is like the rush of waters from the gap of a broken dam. Gerald saw once more the red-haired girl who reminded him of Araby, and so he thought of Araby and forgot what was before him. He had only a vague consciousness of the darkening stage, the forms grouping themselves upon the rocks, the strange effect of the opaline lights that presently relieved the gloom. He was tracing Araby in imagination to her concert. He wondered whether she was enjoying it, whether Olympe had had any difficulty in getting seats, whether she would succeed at once in getting a cab.

He looked at his watch. He did not like the thought of Araby waiting, perhaps, in Piccadilly, during the delay that was inevitable. He hesitated, and looked at his watch again undecidedly. Then he professed to see a friend amongst the audience, and with the whispered assurance of his speedy return, he quietly left his stall.

He got his coat and hat from the attendant, and hurried out of the theatre. He was lucky enough to get a cab at once, and at the promise of an augmented fare the driver urged his horse to a creditable pace. He paid the man at St. James's Hall, and retained him. As he entered the building people began to leave it. He was in the nick of time.

He scanned the stream of faces that flowed to-

wards him. It swept past and round him like water washing a rock in its course. But the face he sought was not there. When he heard a woman say that the song "where it come in about our aingel Byby Lil" had nearly moved her to tears, he understood that it was not amongst these people that he must look for Araby. He said "Vox populi" under his breath, and smiled to himself.

But at the moment of making the discovery, a somewhat large form, at which he had been looking abstractedly as it advanced towards him, became suddenly detached as it were from the others, and familiar to him, and he recognized the shrewd and good-tmpered face of Mrs. Ruthven's maid. Araby was walking beside her, and as her eyes fell upon him she hurried forward with a little gesture of pleased surprise.

"Oh," she said, when she reached him, "where do you think we have been?"

"I think I can guess."

"We went there by mistake," she said, laughing; "we didn't know there were two halls here, and we took our tickets and went in, and there was such a ridiculous plantation-song being sung, and Olympe was so much amused, and she had been dreading the classical music so much,—hadn't you, Olympe?—that after all we did not move. It was all very funny, but oh, my beautiful concert. Is that where

we ought to have gone, up there? I suppose those are the people beginning to come out from it?"

He was looking at her, and listening to her with some amusement. She was speaking rapidly, and in a tone that was partly aggrieved and partly playful.

It is significant that so trifling a thing as the fact of Gerald's overcoat being open, which thus enabled Araby to see, without at the time being conscious of it, some violets he was wearing, was indirectly active in bringing about that which altered perhaps the course of her life. More dire events have sprung from as trifling causes.

"But how do you come to be here?" she asked, unconscious that she had seen that whence indirectly was to come so grave a chain of untoward circumstances.

"I came to see that you got a cab without difficulty."

"Where is my mother?"

"At the theatre."

"Did she send you?"

Gerald shook his head.

"Does she know you have come here?"

"No."

"Oh," said Araby with dismay, "she will be annoyed."

"I have a hansom waiting outside," said Gerald, smiling.

"Won't the play be over? Shall you be back in time? Oh, I wish you hadn't come."

Olympe stood back watching and in silence. Ventnor led the way along the crowded pavement to where his cab was standing. He gave Araby his hand and helped her into the hansom. The maid followed. Araby leant forward.

"Do go back at once," she said hurriedly, "do go straight back—straight, do you hear? and—and, Mr. Ventnor, don't say where you have been."

He raised his hat and was moving away. Some one was calling to him.

"Sir."

The driver drew his attention to Araby, who beckoned to him. She put out her hand.

"It was good of you to come. It was awfully good of you."

A minute later Ventnor was being whirled back along the Strand.

"I wonder," he said to himself, as he hurried back to his place in time to hear the final chorus and see the curtain fall, "I wonder—a great many things."

CHAPTER VII.

A DAILY penance to Araby was the morning walk with her mother. One of the rules, by strict conformance to which Mrs. Ruthven owed something of her health and her youth, was that of a regular and methodical regard of exercise. Araby herself cared as much for walking as most girls who have been brought up in the country and the open air. She had been accustomed in the Eccram days to long rambles through the lanes or in the woods—alone as often as not, or sometimes with such companions as chance or the neighborhood afforded her.

"Oh, for such a walk now!—to start running down the Eccram drive, and to steady to a more dignified pace as she neared the lodge, to turn out then on to the broad highway, and take an eastward or a westward direction—what matter which when each was beautiful?—to crack with her stick the ice on the little frozen pools at the wayside, and then to stride briskly along the iron roads that were overhung by gaunt and frost-rimed elms, and to breathe in the still sharp air, and to meet no one!

But to walk in London, and with her mother,

that was different. The parks were after all a poor imitation of the country; and Mrs. Ruthven made this daily hour and a half of exercise the occasion of lectures that were curiously foreign to the character as Araby read it of the giver of them. And when Mrs. Ruthven was not admonishing, she was teasing her purely and simply and with twinkling eyes. Araby scarcely knew which she dreaded most—the lectures, in the sincerity of which, with her mother's example before her, she could not believe, or the baiting which, if it was premeditated and its cruelty realized, must sooner or later end in her hatred of her tormentor.

It was a relief to her that she was at least allowed to begin the day in peace. Mrs. Ruthven, since she had entered on her occupation of the house in Primate Street, breakfasted in her room, and till nearly eleven Araby had her time to herself. In these frosty winter mornings, with a magnificent disregard of her complexion, she drew her chair round to that side of the table that was nearest to the fire, and, with the newspaper propped up against the urn, she read comfortably as she ate abstractedly, and allowed first one half of her face and then the other to be burned by the dancing blaze. The knowledge that her mother would have interfered with this method of enjoying her lonely breakfast detracted nothing from the pleasure of its freedom. She was

learning at this period of her life to look only to herself for sympathetic companionship. She was not of the type of girl who finds solace in confiding to a diary her thoughts or her impressions, and since leaving Eccram she had no intimate acquaintance at hand to whom she could go for counsel. She was loyal to the mother at whose contrivance she was now so little happy, and in her letters to the old aunts she had never written a word that would serve to enlighten them as to the facts of the case. From Mrs. Ruthven herself they gathered nothing except that which she wished them to know; and if she spoke of them habitually as "those two old things at Eccram," or "those dreadful old aunts of your father, Araby," she was careful to write to them the very admirable sentiments which she knew so well how to word.

"Their goggle eyes used to be big enough when I knew them," she said to herself, "and I am rather good at throwing dust."

On the morning succeeding Mrs. Ruthven's impromptu party Araby descended as usual to the snug brown dining-room. There had been more frost in the night, and the fire burned brightly, and threw a glow of heat from the red-tiled hearth. Araby stood before it, and held out her hands to the blaze. The butler was moving around the table. The tray for Mrs. Ruthven's breakfast stood on the

sideboard, and Olympe came in presently, and after looking about, and asking him for such things as she required for her mistress, she took it in her plump hands and disappeared.

The man removed a cover and withdrew. Araby did not stir at once. She watched the flames, and the curling smoke, and a tile on to which a burning coal had fallen, and which reflected its heart of fire; then some flaky white dust which trembled on a bar of the grate; after that it was the blue of a little flame that caught her attention, and that reminded her of the blue of some one's eyes, and then she smiled, and then she sighed.

She was still standing before the fire when Olympe returned for the salt, which had been forgotten. Araby turned absently and looked at her.

Olympe laid her hand upon her own panting bosom and said,

"All those stairs. I mount again. So stupid. Whatta-bore!" and whisked herself and a salt-cellar out of the room.

Araby's thoughts followed her up the white stairs, and culminated at the side of the dainty bed, in a recollection of the inevitable walk and its attendant evils. Then quite suddenly, and with a surprise that led to self-questioning, Araby realized that she had within herself a knowledge that would render, for that day at least, her mother's shafts powerless to

wound her. She sat down to her breakfast, but she could not eat. She was thinking of every word that Gerald Ventnor had ever said to her. They did not amount to very many, even when they were all gathered together. They would have covered little paper, and most of them were commonplace enough, but—Araby thought of them all. She remembered, too, every time that she had seen him. But it seemed to her that it was yesterday that for the first time she had seen him as he really was. She rose and looked at her reflection in the little square of beveled glass that was let into the wood-work over the mantelpiece. She stood in front of it for some moments, noting many things, and wondering, and then she returned to the table. Her lips were smiling. Her eyes were grave as they fell upon the flowers that Miss Norfolk had mechanically admired at dinner, for the sight of them brought back a recollection of a three-quarter view of Gerald's head, as he had sat with his face turned almost the whole time to Mrs. Ruthven. Then Araby was unhappy for a space, and then she was wildly happy. Oh, the beautiful night! she thought of the drive home with Olympe along Piccadilly after that exquisite moment when the calling back of Gerald to thank him had seemed to bring him so near to her. She had carried home with her the recollection of his smile. The Green Park was a white park that night, the

trees were saved from gauntness by a rich covering of fine snow, and snow lay in a broad expanse on the grass, so that even the further distances were not quite dark. Something gleamed on the path that skirts the park railings. A boy was carrying a pair of skates, and the blades caught the lights of a passing carriage. Then Araby wished to skate. Somewhere, she thought, there must be sheets of ice, where the stars of the winter night were deeply reflected, and where at the edges overhung by trees mysterious shadows would be thrown. Out in the open the moon would see her face, perhaps blurred in the icy mirror. Oh, on such a frozen lake to skate away to the end of time, alone with one's thoughts—or with one other!

So Araby made a meagre breakfast. Her happiness, that had its base on very slender foundations, robbed her of all wish to eat. She rose from the table half a dozen times, to go to the window, to look into the fire, to—but her actions did not seem to have any definite motives. When she saw herself in the glass she smiled.

All this time Araby sought no name for the new element that had come into her life. It was enough for her that—for whatever reason—she was experiencing a joy which had never been hers before. She did not look on into the future with any wonder. She was not of a type that maps out plans or

hopes in advance. All that she realized was, that with Gerald for her friend the difficulties of her life would dwindle.

She had been brought up upon old-fashioned principles, upon principles indeed that now, fortunately or the reverse, according to your view of the old order in contrast with the new, are almost obsolete. She had read little of love, and she had heard still less. Novels in the Eccram days had been accounted dangerous, until they had been carefully considered by that one of the aunts under whose supervision her reading had been done, and poor Araby was unwittingly the symbol of the terrible young person before whom the novel-writer is only now by slow degrees ceasing to bow down. The Miss Woottons had allowed her a free access only to that form of literature which proclaims its purity in its very binding. Cloth gilt is, I believe, the technical term for the abomination which covers the class of book held harmless. It was thus an invertebrate sort of fiction which had been permitted to adorn her book-shelves in those days. The classics, if she had read them at all, came before her in a mutilated form. The result of such censorship was—Araby. She had, then, to make all discoveries for herself, and that which to the average modern girl would have been familiar at the second hand of fiction, was to her an untraveled country. She was

vaguely conscious of the handicap to which her mind had been subjected by the well-meaning rigor of the aunts.

The morning was passing quickly. Araby, having taken no heed of time, was sitting at the piano in the drawing-room, translating, though she was scarcely aware of it, something of her feelings to the music that she was playing, when her wandering eyes chanced to fall upon the clock. Almost simultaneously three things occurred—she started to her feet noting the hour, Olympe came to the room bearing a message from Mrs. Ruthven, announcing that she was ready for her walk, and the front door-bell was rung. Araby hurried upstairs, and presently returned booted, hatted, coated, and drawing on her gloves. She had heard her mother going down from her room, and now she heard her voice in the drawing-room, and the sound also of another voice. Then Araby waited for a few moments before going in, till the color in her face should subside somewhat. Her heart was beating loudly. When she could delay no longer she opened the door.

She saw Gerald then as she had never seen him before. He was standing by the fire in a rough brown suit, and stockings knitted of a coarse wool. He looked altogether a bigger and broader man than she had supposed him. Hitherto she had known him only as a man of London—one of that

great class that lounges through a town life smartly. Now his masculinity seemed more insistent; a subtle air of the country hung about him, and to Araby, who had lived her life in the woods and the fields, its suggestion appealed strongly. Her shyness vanished in a moment. In truth, she scarcely saw her mother just then. She thought of the sound of a gun, she thought inconsequently of dogs and horses, of rods and fishing-tackle, and of whatever else connects itself with an out-of-door life.

Gerald shook hands with her, and repeated the object of his visit. His sister was making up a party to skate at Wimbledon, and he had come round to see whether Mrs. Ruthven and Araby would not be persuaded to join it.

Araby's face expressed the delight the proposal afforded her.

"Can you skate?" asked her mother. "You mustn't come if it is to learn. A beginner wants a lot of help, and so on."

"But I am not a beginner," said Araby firmly, and conscious of her powers.

Ten minutes later Mrs. Ruthven and her daughter were being fitted with skates, and half an hour saw them on their way to Wimbledon. In the train, Gerald, in his lightest mood, kept Araby included in the conversation. Mrs. Ruthven frowned a little sometimes, but Araby's spirits were at a height at

which they could be little affected by these signs of a gathering storm.

The clear winter night had been followed by as clear a day. The air was sharp and still; a pale sunlight gilded but scarcely warmed the crisp morning. Gerald noted Araby's glowing cheeks. Her eyes were bright in anticipation of the exercise before her.

Miss Ventnor's party had gone down by an earlier train. Miss Ventnor herself waited on the edge of the ice for her brother and his friends. She had met Araby before, we remember, on the occasion of Araby's series of visits with Mrs. Sandon. She greeted Mrs. Ruthven warmly, and Mrs. Ruthven thought she annexed her. What Mrs. Ruthven had said of herself was true, girls were always attracted to her, and Miss Ventnor pleased Gerald by saying that she hoped she might be allowed to call in Primate Street.

Araby's eyes traversed the great sheet of ice. A girl swung by tracing broad curves.

"Oh," said Araby to herself, "he shall see what I can do. Oh, I am glad I can skate."

A dozen men besieged the new arrivals. "'Ere you are, lady." "Put your skates on, miss?" "Take a seat, sir."

Araby gave herself into the hands of the most persuasive. He discoursed volubly of frosts he re-

membered, of figure-cutting as it should be done, of the merits comparatively of wooden and acme skates.

"A very pretty pair yours are, miss, too—very fancy they are. Thank you, miss."

Araby was amused, and made appropriate answers, but he was not as deft with his fingers as he was quick with his tongue, and she was chafing to be on the ice. She had the trial to her patience of seeing the others there before her.

"Oh, could you be a little bit quicker?" she said at last.

The man seemed hurt. It was this way, he explained; she might have gone to one of the others who would have fastened her skates more quickly perhaps, and in ten minutes they would have come off, and then—well, there you are. He was "thurrer," he was. If you do a thing at all you had better do it well or else leave it alone. A skate (he held one of Araby's up for demonstration) wasn't like the harness of a fire-escape horse, you couldn't drop it on warm.

Mrs. Ruthven meanwhile took a few steps tentatively, found that her sojourn in India had not robbed her of her power of skating, and then struck out freely and with the grace that characterized all her movements. Gerald gave her his hand. Araby looked on. Were they going to skate away to-

gether? Gerald glanced along the row of chairs and his eyes fell on Araby. Perhaps her face expressed her martyrdom. He said something to Mrs. Ruthven and skated up to the bank. The man was likening—or unlikening in his case, for he used a negative form of simile—the skate to many other things. Gerald grasped the situation, paid the man, dismissed him as incompetent, and adjusted Araby's skates himself. The man continued his discourse the while.

A few minutes more and Araby was on the ice. Gerald watched her as she shot away. She was as some mythical being with winged feet. Her hips showed a rounded line as she swept on in half circles, while the balance of her body was precise as that of the dancing girls of the previous night. Mrs. Ruthven looked at her daughter in surprise.

"Who taught her to skate?" she said to herself.

The sharp ring of the blades on the ice filled the air, and smote the ears of such as hurried from the station, while as yet the skaters were not in sight. The sound of the brooms was soft, and had a permanent place in the noises of the day, and a third sound was the musical whirr of the curling.

Araby was intoxicated with the delights of the day, and the blood ran fast in her veins, and gave a tingling color to her face as she moved. She wore

a rough black serge that allowed her limbs free play and that swung back with the speed of her going. Her slight figure was outlined against the ice or the white of the banks.

"By Jove, she can skate!" said Gerald below his breath.

Miss Ventnor was talking to Mrs. Ruthven, and under the impression that she was making herself agreeable, she was loud in her praises of Araby. In answer to them Mrs. Ruthven said sweetly—

"It is so good of you to say so."

"You must be awfully proud of her," said Miss Ventnor.

Gerald had joined Araby, and the two were skating together.

"And won't you present her and bring her out this season?" persisted Miss Ventnor.

Mrs. Ruthven changed the subject—carefully, however, for she did not wish Miss Ventnor to suppose that she was bored. Her humor was somewhat uncertain at this moment.

"Oh," said Araby to Gerald, "how good of you to devise this pleasure for us. There is nothing better that you could have thought of. When I skate I want to skate for ever. Do you know Longfellow's *Skeleton in Armor?* I read it so often and it enchants me, and half the enchantment of it lies in the lines that——"

Gerald interrupted her to quote——

> "... And, with my skates fast bound,
> Skimmed the half-frozen Sound,
> That the poor whimpering hound
> Trembled to walk on."

"I am glad you know," said Araby, radiantly, "I wanted you to know. Can't you see him, the Viking I mean, cutting along through the frozen air? Oh, he went fast—faster than we could go, and he wore great curled skates, I think, with an edge keen to grip the ice. And that ice! It wasn't *half*-frozen everywhere, you know. That was only in places. There were miles of it I think, square miles I mean, or perhaps it was measureless, and he could skate on and on, coming no nearer to the end of it. And it was clear and smooth as crystal, so that you could see down deeply into it, and there were fish frozen into it like——"

"Prawns in aspic," suggested Gerald.

"Yes, like prawns in aspic," said Araby, smiling,—"though you have brought my Viking over many centuries,—and behind him he left the only marks the ice bore, and they were bold free lines or great sweeping curves when he went on the outside edge. Let us go on the outside edge now. Oh, don't you like,—take care, there's a big crack,—don't you like skating better than anything else in the world?"

Gerald laughed.

"Not better than anything else in the world," he said.

They swept round together to the right and to the left with the regularity of a pendulum.

"What better?" asked Araby.

"I don't know—hunting. Listening to you."

"That is the sort of thing you say to—other people." She hesitated and colored. She had been going to instance her mother, but she substituted the abstract for the concrete.

They skated on in silence then for a few minutes. A shadow was on Araby's face. Presently her brow cleared. Small things amused her on this happy day. A man's fall moved her to laughter, and the shambling of a beginner—a lady with weak ankles who shuffled and slid, and walked by turns upon the wooden part of her skates, with an uncertainty of balance that resulted at times in her feet proceeding in advance of her body. The frenzied war-dance which preceded her inevitable tumble seemed irresistibly funny.

Gerald looked at Araby as she laughed—how she laughed, how lightly and musically, and with what infection!—and he laughed too. They laughed together, looking each at the other with twinkling eyes.

Araby knew then that laughter, like tears, binds hearts together. She felt that Gerald and she knew one another better than heretofore.

They separated presently, Miss Ventnor joining Araby, and Gerald Mrs. Ruthven. Miss Ventnor spoke of Mrs. Sandon, and Araby was warm in her praise.

"It was in Earl Street that you met my brother, wasn't it?" said Miss Ventnor.

"We were staying there before mother took a house," said Araby.

By lunch-time the two girls were fast friends. Miss Ventnor was an enthusiast, and took sudden fancies to people. The latest friend was always the only friend in the world. Miss Norfolk had at one time been one of these only friends. Maud Athol, Gertrude Woodford, and a score of others shared this distinction.

"And I always like Gerald's friends," said Miss Ventnor, making a sudden turn on her skates which resulted in a fall. "Oh, my poor elbow, it will be blue for the Athols' dance to-morrow." She said this from a sitting posture on the ice, and continued as she regained her feet—"And you are Gerald's friend, aren't you? you or Mrs. Ruthven, which is it? And so I am certain to like you. I hope, by the way," she added, as she shook the white from her skirts, and as an after-thought, "that you will like me."

"That will be easy," said Araby, frankly.

A footman, treading on the ice gingerly,—and

like Agag in that he went delicately,—approached Miss Ventnor to inform her that lunch was ready, and that the rest of her party had assembled.

Miss Ventnor was greeted with a chorus of bantering reproach. One said one thing and one another, but the more part knew very well why they were come together. The meal passed merrily. The champagne sparkled in tumblers and the pale sunlight. Mrs. Ruthven enlarged her acquaintance that day by about a dozen people. Lord George Athol devoted himself to her, and whispered later to his wife, with the result that Lady George asked to be allowed to call, and begged Mrs. Ruthven to waive ceremony and bring her daughter to a small dance in Barn Street on the following night.

"But Araby isn't out," said Mrs. Ruthven.

"Oh, but such a small dance," said Lady George.

"You must, indeed," said Miss Ventnor; "and won't you dine with us first? I know mamma would be delighted."

She knew nothing of the sort. Gerald added his entreaties to hers, but Mrs. Ruthven gave no definite answer.

The ice became more crowded. Every train that came in sent a stream pouring down to the bank. The figure-skaters had some difficulty in keeping their chosen spaces free, and regarded with envy the clear stretch of the best ice which the club reserved

for the use of its members. The scene was painted in bright colors against a white background. Here a bit of scarlet on a girl's coat made a spot that glowed like an ember. The frosty winter had brought out warm browns and reds, and they moved hither and thither like autumn leaves blown by the wind. Later, when the sun set gorgeously, the very snow grew pink, and the ice had a sheen as of gold blended with crimson. A red mist hung in the direction of London.

Araby thought of the moon that had turned London of the night before to a silver city, and that soon would rise. She wished that she could stay on far into the night, till every other skater—every other save one—should have gone home. Then, she thought, on the lonely stretch of ice they two would swing, she and that other, on magic blades that traced fantastic patterns—sometimes apart, sometimes joining hands. There should be fairy music to such dancing as that! What shadows would their swaying bodies cast upon ice—shadows that would be clean-cut in so bright a moonlight. How they would turn, and circle, and blend. . . .

Gerald skated up to her. His face had a ruddiness that came in part from the exercise, in part from the russet sky.

"We are going presently," he said.

"So soon?" said Araby.

Gerald smiled.

"Not tired yet?" he said.

"No," said Araby. "I feel as if I should never be tired again."

She looked across to the blazing west as she spoke. Her eyes and her cheeks were glowing. Her hair caught the light, and flamed like the sunset. She looked an incarnation of fire. The thought struck Gerald, and he looked at her in wonder.

"I believe," he said, "if you took off your hat and let down your hair, that it would scorch me. It would be like flames curling round your face. Your eyes are burning too like coals. Oh, you are splendid. I wish I could paint. I wish I could write poetry. I would paint you, I would write you, you fire girl!"

Araby colored deeply. Gerald remembered himself.

"I beg your pardon," he said, gently. "I scarcely know how I came to speak like that to you. I could not help it. You are angry with me!"

"I am not angry," she answered low. "I am only——"

"Only what?" in a voice as low.

"Glad," said Araby. She turned her head a little.

He saw the oval of her cheek, and the color that was slowly leaving it. There were tears in her eyes when next he saw them.

He was tempted to follow up his advantage. Instead, however, he brought matters back to the safety of the commonplace by asking her if she would not like some tea before going. He read her as a book, and her absolute inexperience was revealed to him.

The cup steamed in the winter twilight. He watched her as she emptied it. Even while she drank she could not resist moving on her skates.

The scattered party was long in assembling. Miss Ventnor had her skates taken off, and was sliding tentatively at the edge of the ice. Mrs. Ruthven was talking to Lady George, and she looked in the direction of Gerald and Araby. She saw them skate off once more together.

"Faster," said Araby, "faster. This is the end of it. Faster! The outside edge. . . . ."

They swung along.

CHAPTER VIII.

Mrs. Ruthven went home that night in an uncertain mood. The day had been successful, but it had left her discontented. Her state of mind evinced itself in a hundred odd ways. She was silent and she talked by turns. She moved about her rooms restlessly, and she contemplated her daughter as she might have studied a picture or a statue, or anything else that is inanimate. Once she went over to her, and holding her by the shoulders, she looked deeply into her eyes. She kissed her forehead suddenly, and then let her go with a kind of push.

Araby was startled and shrank back. The incident had the element of the unfamiliar, and from the unfamiliar it was in Araby's nature to retreat. She regarded her mother with a mingling of dread and fascination.

"Who taught you to skate?" Mrs. Ruthven said. "Who taught you to skate so well?"

"I have skated all my life," said Araby. "Whenever there was frost at Eccram we used to skate. The park pond is very shallow, and it bears before

anything else—I mean a very short frost used to get us a day's skating."

"Who is 'us'?"

"The vicarage boy and girl and myself."

"How old is the boy?"

"Nineteen or twenty now I suppose."

"Describe him."

"How can I? Dark, tall, rather lanky—what use to tell you that? The words don't express him. He is at Woolwich now—the shop, I think they call it. He taught me to skate. I wish I could do all that he can do."

"What was his name?"

"Pine—Herbert Pine."

"Has any one ever told you you are pretty?"

Araby colored. She evaded the question.

"You have assured me that I am not," she said.

"Do you think you are yourself?"

"Oh, mother, how can I tell?"

"You are not blind," said Mrs. Ruthven, shortly. She was lying back now in a deep chair; her hands were clasped behind her head, and she looked at Araby with half-closed eyes.

Araby moved uneasily.

"You have assured me that I am not," she said again.

"And," said Mrs. Ruthven, "is your confidence in me such as to make you believe all that I say?"

The movement that Araby gave then was once more indicative of her uneasiness. She looked at her mother furtively and looked away. There was a long pause.

"And you judge me—you," said Mrs. Ruthven then,—"you who understand nothing, and don't even know what is before you and behind me. What can you know of me, Araby? There are excuses that you would not realize even if I explained them to you, which I certainly shall not. I doubt whether God Himself could understand me—yet He made me, I suppose. And you, I have not any doubt, judge me by your own inexperience."

Araby looked about for some shelter. A book lay beside her, but she lacked the courage to open it and read deliberately. She took up a photograph which was standing unframed upon a table. She handled it nervously and in abstraction. Presently she saw that she held a likeness of Gerald. It was a new one, and it had been promised to Mrs. Ruthven before even it was taken. Indeed the promise and the photograph stood to each other in the light of cause and effect.

"Oh," said Araby, hoping to change the subject, even at the risk of starting so dangerous another as that she was choosing, "what a nice photograph."

She looked at it attentively. It seemed to her that it gave her the protection she was seeking. The

likeness was admirable, and neither flattered the original nor maligned him. It was Gerald Ventnor as she knew him and as she thought of him. He wore some violets in his coat. Araby was scarcely aware of the danger of the ground on which she was treading.

"How fond he is of them," she said, speaking of the flowers.

"Who is fond of what?"

"Mr. Ventnor of violets," said Araby.

There flashed upon her vividly at this moment the recollection of the color under a lamp of a bunch she had lately seen. We remember that while Gerald had been talking to her the night before in the vestibule of the St. James's Hall she had unconsciously contemplated the closely packed violets he was wearing in his coat. She had a certain experience in arranging flowers, for Mrs. Ruthven always made her of use in this respect, and all unconsciously, in her unconscious scrutiny of those Gerald carried in his button-hole, she had vaguely thought how elaborately each blossom must be wired. Something in the stiffness of the result had displeased her. She was only now aware of this. Partly because anything connected with Gerald was at this time of paramount interest to her, and partly, too, to avert a renewal of the embarrassing experience of the last few moments, Araby commented upon the wiring

of flowers, and the effect *manque* in consequence thereof, of those of which she was thinking. She was very young, you see, and she had an occasional way of dogmatizing. It was amusing, and not without a certain charm.

"Of course one knows that wire is necessary," she said with the air of a judge, "but one ought never to know that it is there."

Now it chanced that Gerald Ventnor had not been wearing the violets in question at dinner. Mrs. Ruthven, who had stopped her carriage and bought them on the way to the theatre, had given them to him there.

"When did you see them?" said Mrs. Ruthven, suddenly.

"Last night," said Araby.

"But you left half-way through dinner, and I bought them myself as we drove to the theatre."

Araby suddenly grew pale, then crimson. Mrs. Ruthven was not looking at her, and she hoped that her admission might escape notice.

"You don't know what you are talking about," Mrs. Ruthven said. She had been annoyed by her daughter's criticism of that which she had chosen. "I thought you didn't. You presume to give your opinion upon a thing which it turns out you have never seen." She broke off. "How did you know about them?" she asked.

Araby had begun to breathe again. Now once more that unconquerable awe of her mother took possession of her, and she was silent. She turned the photograph over and over in her hands. She looked down.

"Yes; how did you know about them?" said Mrs. Ruthven again.

The full glare of a tall lamp was on Araby where she sat. She felt as some spy may feel when the search-light is turned upon him, and changes night to open day.

Araby's color and her expression arrested her mother's attention. Momentary relief came in the form of the butler with letters. Araby, under pretext of seeing whether there were any for herself, changed her place. In so doing she left Gerald's photograph behind her, and she felt that she had parted with a talisman.

Mrs. Ruthven glanced at her letters. She opened them. They were of small importance, and she did not read them. She was wondering whether it could be that Gerald Ventnor had discussed her with Araby. It was the fancy of a jealous woman. Even that, she thought, would not account for that which was puzzling her.

"Look here, Araby, something is confusing you. I can see that well enough, and I can see too that whatever it is concerns what we were talking of."

Araby tried to protest, but she was scrupulously conscientious as to truth, and she was not a woman of the world, and could neither parry nor evade straight questions.

"Will you tell me," said Mrs. Ruthven, impatiently, "how you knew that these violets existed at all?"

Araby was silent.

"Well?"

Araby heard the moments ticking slowly from the clock on the mantel-piece. The pendulum was a Cupid in a swing. Araby thought that he was marking out the span of her torture and protracting it. She thought of a certain clock in Eccram which had once ticked out the measure of a youthful punishment. Then she thought of the old aunts.

"Oh, Aunt Clara," she thought, "if I could go back to you!"

This was the aunt who had wept with her when the punishment was over. It had been administered, Araby remembered, for some trifling obstinacy. Araby's own tears had flowed during the enforced detention in the schoolroom on that summer day, and when all was over and peace restored, Miss Wootton had gently pointed out to her how many tears might have been saved by opening the rebellious little heart at once. Relevantly or not, Araby thought of all this in those few moments.

"Well?" said Mrs. Ruthven once more; "and when I ask questions I like answers. I am waiting, Araby. I want to be told how you knew at all of the existence of the violets Mr. Ventnor was wearing!"

"Because I saw them."

"I tell you at dinner they weren't there!"

"I saw them later."

"When? later? be explicit, Araby. I don't choose to drag it from you word by word, and I mean to know!"

Araby looked desperately at the photograph which she had left upon the table. She felt that in admitting the meeting at the St. James's Hall, she would implicate Gerald. She had a wish to implore his forgiveness.

"I mean to know," said Mrs. Ruthven again.

Araby then bowed to the inevitable, and made her innocent confession with a feeling of guilt that would have done credit to a criminal. Yet the incident in itself was nothing. The concealment of it magnified it out of all proportion to the actual facts of the case, and she felt as one convicted of a crime. She had incurred her mother's displeasure, and worse than that, she had been in a manner disloyal to Gerald. She was oppressed by a sense of the injustice of circumstance, for under the consciousness of her offence in the matter, was the

knowledge that her mother could not fairly expect her confidence. But so strictly had she been brought up in the belief that concealment of any sort is wrong, that she was far more distressed than was at all warranted.

Mrs. Ruthven meanwhile rapidly reviewed the situation. She took a definite line presently, overlooking the consequences in her haste.

"As you said nothing about it, Araby," she said, "I was determined to make you tell me. It was really very good-natured of Mr. Ventnor to go, as I told him at the time. When he pretended that he had done it of his own accord, I am afraid he rather exceeded his instructions. I shall talk to him about it. I wonder you didn't see that he was amusing himself. He isn't thoughtless, as men go—at least I have not found him so; but it wasn't quite fair to make fun of you, was it?"

CHAPTER IX.

Mrs. Ruthven had no sooner said this than she regretted it. She was seldom short-sighted, and she realized at once that a word to Gerald would naturally elicit the fact, that in claiming to have sent him on the mission to the St. James's Hall she had departed from the truth.

The immediate result of this falsehood was, however, of import to Araby. It brought many small things to an issue. All day there had been growing in Mrs. Ruthven's mind an aversion to the sudden intimacy which was apparently springing up between her daughter and Gerald Ventnor. We are beginning to know Mrs. Ruthven by this time, and her reasons are not very far to seek. Such young men as she chose to annex she was accustomed to consider her own indisputable property. For this day at least Araby on winged feet had outstripped her. Gerald was obviously attracted to the girl. The fact of his having left the theatre on the previous evening (on some trifling and false pretext), in order to rush off—and Gerald was lazy rather than energetic—on the chance of being of use to her, seemed to

prove that Araby's power over him was greater than her mother cared to think.

Araby said nothing, and presently went to bed. She neither believed nor did she entirely disbelieve that which her mother had just told her. She was very unhappy, and she could not trace results to their definite causes. She was bewildered too, and she thought with shuddering of the evening she had gone through. Her mother was to her as unintelligible as ever, and she was now ten times more alarming. Araby cried herself to sleep.

Mrs. Ruthven stayed in the drawing-room to think. She had made a mistake, she told herself again, in claiming a knowledge of Gerald's meeting with Araby at the St. James's Hall. The next time that Araby saw him it was to be expected that she would make some allusion to the unfortunate statement, and the next time that Araby saw Gerald would in all probability be on the morrow, if with Mrs. Ruthven she dined at Lady Ventnor's, and went on to Lady George Athol's dance. In Barn Street she would dance with Gerald. Perhaps she danced as well as she skated. Araby, who was not out, would enjoy this dance with the attractive and ingenuous enjoyment of a girl at her first ball, and Araby's cheeks would glow and her eyes would glow, and Gerald would see it, and something of her enchantment would be conveyed to him, and Araby's

hold on him would be strengthened. Then there would be moments that seemed made for confidences, and Gerald would hear of Mrs. Ruthven's version of the incident of his rush from the Strand to Piccadilly, and his eyes would be opened, and Araby and he would be drawn nearer to each other in combining against her. Her inaccuracy had been trifling, but it might have dire issue. She smiled to herself, but her teeth were clenched. The grim irony of the case presented itself to her.

The swinging Cupid was measuring out an unpleasant quarter of an hour for her too. She sat still for a long time. She held a book, but she made no attempt to read it. She closed her eyes, and lay back amongst her cushions. They seemed to afford her small ease, for she moved them impatiently, and rearranged them more than once.

She rose presently, and throwing down her book, she went over to the mantelpiece and looked at the clock. The time was eleven. She heard the servants going up to bed, and noted the heavy footfall of the cook. Olympe was not less stout, but she had an elasticity that discounted her weight. Mrs. Ruthven felt that just then she could not sleep, and she called to her from the landing not to sit up for her.

She went to the window and drew aside the curtains. Primate Street was white with powdered snow. A policeman turned his bull's-eye down

white areas and on to white door-steps. A cab went noiselessly by; a cat crossed the road furtively, and disappeared through some railings. Here and there lights dotted the houses.

Mrs. Ruthven gave a sigh that was partly restive. She pulled back the curtain impatiently, and she began to pace the room. Sounds ceased gradually in the house. A blind rattled as it was pulled up in a bedroom. There was silence after that, and then there came a moment when the limits of the space which Mrs. Ruthven was pacing became unendurably confined. It seemed to her as she moved about the room that it was getting smaller. She felt restrained and cramped. The fire had fallen low in the grate, and though the embers glowed with the brightness of frost, the air was very cold.

"I will go out," Mrs. Ruthven said, suddenly and aloud. "I must go out. If I went to bed I should not sleep."

She stole up to her room, and chose a thick veil and a loose cloak. She closed the door gently behind her, and started walking briskly. She had no design. She wanted to move, that was all, and to expend thus the restlessness that possessed her. She passed through Berkeley Square. The gaunt trees were painted in whites and blacks. Presently she was in Bond Street. It seemed to belong to her that empty night. Here was Castanet's, where

Gerald and she had talked; there was the gallery where later she had met Araby. She shuddered, and walked faster. She found herself noting the names on shops as one does at such times as one finds shutters closed. She reached Piccadilly.

She shrank from contact with the women who passed her. In twos and threes they walked or singly, and she wondered what each thought of the other. A large negress walking modestly horrified her. She crossed to the lonelier side of the street. The Green Park spread itself whitely behind the railing, and the stars were twinkling above in a frosty sky. Snow gave crisply under her feet. She watched the traffic eastward and westward; horses strained and slid on the slippery road.

She reached Hyde Park Corner then, and she walked on. The omnibuses came now at longer intervals. She turned down Seville Street, and into Lowndes Square, where she found more white trees, then through Lowndes Street she walked into Cadogan Place and Sloane Street.

That was the Norfolk's house, that small one between a larger two. It was all dark. The painting of the houses on either side did not tend to make it look less dark. Mrs. Ruthven thought of the night when after supper at Gerald's club she had driven the Norfolk girl home, and by the same

token, she remembered that she had not returned Mrs. Norfolk's call.

Her restlessness was now somewhat abated. You can walk everything off, she said to herself, from a cold to an affair of the affections; and this was neither the one nor the other. Another mile, she thought, and she might return home with the knowledge that there sleep would await her. She dreaded sleeplessness as she dreaded little else. She had known stifling nights in India, when physical discomfort had made rest impossible, and she had known a wakefulness that was worse than anything that could be caused by the mere state of the thermometer. It was horrible to lie awake, to hear the hours strike, and to think, and think, and think, till nothing seemed real. . . .

She had done wisely in coming out. The moon was up, and threw black shadows on to the snow. The number of the stars seemed to increase; London looked clean and pure. Walking aimlessly still, Mrs. Ruthven passed along Pont Street, and presently she found herself in Lennox Gardens. The name caught her eye, and it was a moment before she remembered that here lived Lady Ventnor. She sought and found her number. It was a big red house such as new London builds. It had a porch with a massive gate of wrought iron, behind which was a white hall door. A balcony ran across the breadth of

the house, and broadened over the door to the width of the roof of the porch.

Mrs. Ruthven crossed the road.

A hansom was coming up the street, its lights, like eyes of fire, glistening on the snow. The occupant with his stick was directing the driver. It was Gerald who jumped out, and was delayed for a moment while he paid his fare. Mrs. Ruthven saw his face clearly. He ran up the steps, and having swung the iron gate after him, he let himself into the house with a latch-key. Mrs. Ruthven heard the locking and the bolting of the door on the inside, and she made up her mind about Araby.

CHAPTER X.

THE morning brought Lady Ventnor's note endorsing her daughter's invitation. Lady Ventnor begged Mrs. Ruthven to waive ceremony. She had been wishing to call, and would have done so but for so and so, or so and so, and Miss Ventnor had taken so great a fancy to Araby that Lady Ventnor hoped, and so on.

This note was the outcome of a severe tussle between Miss Ventnor and her mother.

"People I know nothing about," Lady Ventnor said. "You had no right to ask them here without consulting me."

"My good mother," said Miss Ventnor, quietly, "don't make such a fuss about nothing. They are Gerald's friends, and they are entirely charming. Lady George was enchanted with them yesterday, and implored them to come to her dance. I couldn't do less than ask them to dine here and go with us; I did, and there's an end of it. Now it only remains for you to write and add your invitation to mine——"

"I won't be dictated to by my children," said Lady Ventnor, feebly.

"There is paper," said Miss Ventnor, sweetly.

"I shall not write," said Lady Ventnor. "You must put them off, and get out of the mess as best you can. You have no one to blame for it but yourself."

Here Lady Ventnor edged towards the door, but her daughter intercepted her.

Then Lady Ventnor began to cry, after which she wrote effusively, as we know.

Mrs. Ruthven met Araby in the morning as if nothing had happened. Araby, indeed, expected no unusual mood. Her mother was always unaccountable.

"You would like to go to Eccram, Araby."

"To Eccram?"

Mrs. Ruthven explained that the old aunts had written a few days since upon the subject. She had said nothing to Araby at the time, but had kept the invitation open.

"You can go," said Mrs. Ruthven.

A week sooner Araby would have been overjoyed. Now she received the permission with a sudden misgiving. She controlled her feelings and thanked her mother.

"And you had better help Olympe to pack," said Mrs. Ruthven.

"What, now, mother?"

Her tone expressed her amazement.

"Yes, dear."

Araby's face fell.

"When am I to go?" she asked.

In spite of her the question framed itself in this form.

"To-day."

"Mother!"

"Aren't you glad?" said Mrs. Ruthven, smiling. "You have talked to me of the delights of Eccram till all was blue, and now that I give you a chance of tasting them again, you look aggrieved. You are inconsistent."

Araby said nothing for a few moments. She was seeking a motive for this sudden plan of her mother's. She knew Mrs. Ruthven's words to be laws inexorable and unchangeable as those of the Medes and Persians. For a second or so she thought of rebellion, but Gerald seemed to have deserted her, and she stood alone. Thrown back upon herself, she reviewed the situation much as Mrs. Ruthven herself would have reviewed it. She knew that her mother had received a note from either Lady or Miss Ventnor, because amongst the letters which she sent up to her room there had been one across the envelope of which was stamped in a somewhat assertive die the address of the house in Lennox Gardens. It might be that something had occurred to postpone the dinner and the dance. It

would be a relief to know, since she was not to be present, that neither was going to take place. There was a second hypothesis in the forlorn hope that Mrs. Ruthven had forgotten the engagements for the evening.

"But Lady Ventnor's?" said Araby tentatively at last, "Lady Ventnor's and the George Athols'?"

Mrs. Ruthven looked at her hands, and twisted round a certain ring that never failed her in moments that were difficult or perplexing. Araby had a theory that her mother consulted it. It was set with emeralds that blazed as with sea flames, and it had an Indian history. It had been torn from the hand of a dead ranee, and a dismal tale of ill-luck descended with it to one who gave it to Mrs. Ruthven with its full pedigree, and the wish that it might prove her destruction as she had proved his. Mrs. Ruthven laughed at the time, declaring that she was not superstitious.

"We shall be very good friends, you and I, little ring," she prophesied, with a success that had followed her at least up to the time of which I write.

"Well, that is just it," she said presently in answer to Araby's ventured question. "I don't want to take you to this dance. You are not out, Araby, and I disapprove of girls going to balls before they are."

"But a small dance——! Lady George said it was to be a small dance."

"Dear Araby, don't argue. I am sorry if you are disappointed. You would not really have enjoyed it. Very young girls either bore men—a boredom I can tell you which reacts upon the girl—or else they amuse them, in which case the unhappy girl is made a fool of. I don't want this to happen with you, Araby; what you told me last night showed me how easily this *would* happen with you. You must wait. I will present you this year, and after that your fun can begin, and I shall give you plenty of freedom; but till then—and it is only a few months—you must be content."

Araby said nothing. The covert allusion to Gerald had wounded her more deeply perhaps than her mother knew. If he had indeed been sent on that mission, which she had thought self-imposed, then it was true that he had laughed at her. And this was a terrible thought. It may be that Araby's youth made it even the more terrible. It was with great difficulty that she kept the tears from her eyes. Now she would go. Now she wished to go. Nothing would have induced her to dine at Lady Ventnor's, nor to dance in Barn Street. Yesterday had been too happy a day, and to-day came the penalty. Oh, London! It stifled her; it shut her in; it crushed her. She had a fancy that Eccram would

prove balm to her wounded feelings; and there came to her a longing for it fiercer even than those she used to experience in the early days of her life in town. But it did not last.

She left the room and ran up to her own.

"Olympe, I am going to Eccram. I am going to-day."

"I know. I begin already to pack. Mademoiselle is glad to go?"

Araby saw then that her trunk stood open at the foot of her bed. Olympe with careful selection had ranged beside it such things as she thought her young mistress would require. Under a chair lay her skates strapped neatly together. The sight of them brought to her a flood of recollections. Her lips trembled.

"Yes, I am glad to go. I—never was so glad about anything before. I am going home—home."

Something in the tone of the voice that spoke made Olympe look up suddenly. She had just knelt down beside the box, and was taking out the tray as a preparation for the beginning of her labors. She put it hurriedly down beside her on the floor, and rose to her feet as rapidly as her build would allow.

The next moment Araby was crying on her ample bosom. In all her woe Araby remarked that she had never before known how ample it was. It had

a roundness and a warmth that somehow suggested the maternity that lay in the good woman's nature, and if the soothing words, half of French and half of English, that Olympe spoke tenderly and caressingly into her ears made her tears to flow but the more freely, Araby was greatly comforted. No explanation was asked and none offered between them. Olympe had a tact that would have been invaluable in other walks of life. It had indeed its very appreciable worth in her own.

She regarded Araby with an affection and a pity that lost nothing from the fact of her admiration for Araby's mother. She alone possibly of all who knew Mrs. Ruthven, approached to an understanding of her. Olympe had lived in strange places, and had what her late mistress once called the devil's own experience. It was experience, however, for the most part at second-hand, and Olympe was content to look on.

"Je me connais en hommes," she said, much as Napoleon may have said it. Moreover she could add, "En femmes aussi."

Araby, then, dried her eyes after a time, and even was led to take some small interest in her packing. She thought of Eccram, and the old aunts who would be so glad to see her. They would come running out into the hall, Miss Laura possibly carrying unconsciously at her back the

antimacassar off the chair in which she had been sitting. (The antimacassars at Eccram were aggressive, and of a terrible kind of work, which is, I believe, called crochet, and which composes itself of loops and chains, that catch on to buttons.) Araby smiled in recollection of the day when one of her aunts had taken unwittingly an antimacassar to church. Behind all this was the burning thought of Gerald. She was hurt beyond endurance—if the words had any meaning, for what is there in life that cannot be endured?—by the suggestion that he had made her his fair sport. At one moment she believed it, at another she had the conviction that her mother had not been bound strictly by any regard for truth. At dinner that night at Lady Ventnor's she would have been able to tell from his manner. . . .

She could not bear to think of Lennox Gardens or Barn Street. Oh, let her think of Eccram, where nothing that was disturbing could enter. She would throw herself into all the old country pleasures. She would fill her days so full that there would be no time for thoughts of Gerald to come to her. She would visit the old women in the village; she would walk for miles; she would ride if the frost broke up. Perhaps Herbert Pine would be at home. Then she would skate with him, and forget Gerald. She shuddered as she

thought this. There would be the animals anyway, the horses, the dogs. Herbert Pine used to be a little bit in love with her. It would be nice to have some one in love with you, so that you could shrug your shoulders at some one else. Yes, she would take her prettiest frocks after all. And she would take her Bond Street hat for Sundays. The vicarage pew commanded that of the Hall. It would be nice too to be fresh from London, and to be looked at with interest. Horrid London! dreadful London! where everything was hollow, and there was no truth or faith! Still to come thence into the heart of a somewhat backward part of the country, where at least she would be better-looking and better dressed than any of the local girls, was not without its attendant satisfactions. Araby was startled by the opening of the door and the appearance of her mother.

"I have just told them to get you some lunch, dear. You have not very much time, because I find that you must be at Euston by three. You reach Eccram at nine to-night, and I have telegraphed to your aunts to have you met. I am going to lunch with you now, and I will go to Euston with you and see you off, and tell the guard to look after you. I wish I could send Olympe with you."

"I shall be all right alone, mother. I have traveled alone before."

"Exactly. Now come and have something to eat, and Olympe will finish packing for you."

Araby followed her mother from the room. Mrs. Ruthven's manner was kind, even affectionate. She gave Araby more money than it was possible that she could want. She entrusted her with warm messages to the Miss Woottons.

"I shall miss you, Araby. You won't believe that perhaps, but I shall. You are a very good girl in some ways, and I dare say I am rather trying to you."

Araby murmured something, she was not sure what. She made an effort to eat, but her plate went away much as it had come to her. Sometimes she wondered whether she was not dreaming—the whole thing was so sudden. She found it difficult to realize that she was going away. Presently she began to wonder how long her visit was to last. The old aunts were so much attached to her that they, she knew, would be unwilling to fix a limit to its duration.

"I believe you are a little sorry to go," Mrs. Ruthven said.

"I am," said Araby—"for many things. But I shall be very glad to see them all again at Eccram."

"Of course."

Araby waited a few moments, and then asked—

"How long shall I be away?"

"We need not settle that just now," said her mother. "Perhaps I may go down myself; I don't know. I may be dull when you are gone, and I may follow you down."

Araby looked round the room. It had a few associations for her now. Some of them were agreeable, and some were painful, and some of them were at this moment both. She thought of the morning when she had first begun to think of Gerald. That was so short a time ago!

"And you must write to me," said Mrs. Ruthven. "I should not be at all surprised if we were better friends when next we meet. You wish to like me, don't you?"

"If you would let me, mother."

Mrs. Ruthven rang for coffee, and not many minutes later a cab stood at the door.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. RUTHVEN never cheapened herself—she was far too clever a woman for that; and after all she wrote a note to Lady Ventnor, excusing herself from dining in Lennox Gardens on the ground of the absence of Araby. The immediate result of this was, as Mrs. Ruthven expected, that two days later Lady Ventnor called formally in Primate Street, though she said all sorts of things to her daughter, and again abused Mrs. Sandon to her for the introduction. But to Barn Street Mrs. Ruthven determined to go.

When she had left her note she directed her coachman to Earl Street. She had seen little of Mrs. Sandon of late, and she was glad to find her at home. Mrs. Sandon received her with open arms.

"And what have you done with Araby?" she asked.

"Sent her down to see the Wootton women to Eccram."

"What for?"

"Fun," said Mrs. Ruthven.

"Whose?" said Mrs. Sandon. She looked at her cousin for a few moments in silence. "Now I wonder why, really," she said then with amusement. "You told her probably that she wanted country air. So we all do. But I wonder what your real reason was?"

Mrs. Ruthven laughed merrily.

"Araby likes Eccram."

Mrs. Sandon frowned, but her eyes continued to smile.

"I ought to lecture you," she said at last. "I disapprove of you dreadfully. I content myself with discussing you with Lady Murgatroyd. I tell her all that I have against you—and there is a good deal, Johnnie. The odd thing about it is, that she always takes your part."

"I like Lady Murgatroyd," said Mrs. Ruthven—"which suggests at this moment cause and effect, doesn't it? But I like her, and she interests me as an example, a smybol almost, of the unsatisfied. She comes to see me very often."

A ring heralded a visitor, and it was Lady Murgatroyd who was announced. She looked tired and depressed. She brightened up as she saw Mrs. Ruthven. She talked more rapidly than of old, and hurried from subject to subject. Mrs. Ruthven looked at the clock after a time. She had to order some flowers to wear at Lady George's dance.

"Oh, you are going there," said Lady Murgatroyd; "so am I. Will you dine with me? and we can go together. It would be charitable. If you have no other engagement, do come."

Mrs. Ruthven had no other, and she accepted the invitation.

The house in Primate Street felt empty when she returned to it to spend the two hours that would intervene between then and eight o'clock. It was always amusing to tease Araby; but just now Mrs. Ruthven was not sure that she would have felt any inclination to tease her.

She thought of her walk of the night before with wonder. It was very seldom that her heart got the better of her head, but at least for once in the battle it had triumphed. She preferred to keep it well under control. Her head, while allowing her much freedom, had kept her to a straight path.

Lady Murgatroyd's house was on the opposite side of Earl Street to that of Mrs. Sandon. It was very much smaller, but otherwise of the same build. Lady Murgatroyd met Mrs. Ruthven gratefully.

"It was really kind of you to come. Do my canaries bother you?"

The birds in question, regardless of the hour, were screeching in the back drawing-room. Lady Murgatroyd had been playing the piano, and she

explained that this always started them off. She threw a cloth over the cage and the noise ceased. Mrs. Ruthven admired the rooms. She had not seen them by lamplight before. She said that Lady Murgatroyd had been fortunate in hitting upon a paper that lighted up so well.

"It was chosen for me by one who was once a great friend," said Lady Murgatroyd, and she sighed, from which fact Mrs. Ruthven gathered that Sloane Wetherley, of whom she had heard from Mrs. Sandon, was not forgotten.

Dinner passed uneventfully. Mrs. Ruthven would probably have been bored but for the knowledge that she was to see Gerald later on. On the preceding night very possibly she might have been in sympathy with the temperament of her hostess, but to-night she felt once more her supremacy amongst women. She had a theory that plain people, and commonplace people, and people generally unattractive, were protected from hopes and desires which could never be realized. She had thought that thus nature adjusted circumstances to meet cases. But her knowledge of Lady Murgatroyd told her that this plain woman suffered keenly.

A certain photograph had lately made its reappearance in Lady Murgatroyd's rooms. It stood framed on a table; unframed it lay here and there amongst others. Mrs. Ruthven took up one of these.

Lady Murgatroyd watched her for a moment or two and began to tremble. Then quite quietly she told Mrs. Ruthven the ugly story of her friend.

"I would have trusted him with my soul," she said in conclusion.

Mrs. Ruthven, strangely enough, was constantly finding herself the recipient of confidences. Nothing ever surprised her. It would be difficult to say what it was in her that inspired people with the wish to tell her their tragedies, but, for whatever reason, both men and women were moved to raise for her the veil that hid their inner lives.

She said little at the end of the present disclosures, but she looked at the photograph with interest. Lady Murgatroyd seemed disappointed. She sighed impatiently, and changed the conversation.

At length Mrs. Ruthven's carriage came round. Both felt its arrival to be a relief.

Barn Street was blocked with carriages. They reached up from the big stone house which was the George Athols' to that end of the street where were such smaller houses as Mrs. Manton's, and the Saltashes', and that little pink house where once had lived Billy Hartley and Mary Anne Smith.

Lady George was sincere in her regrets for the absence of Araby. Mrs. Ruthven made what excuses seemed to her good, and with her smile passed on to Lord George.

"And you haven't brought the beautiful daughter," he said. "Perhaps it is just as well, as she isn't out. Lady George's small dances have a way of growing."

"And what we are giving a dance for at all," said Lady George, who had an ear for all that her husband said, "with one girl married and one engaged, I don't know. I believe we do this sort of thing to amuse our husbands, Mrs. Ruthven."

"Yes, to amuse our husbands," said Mrs. Ruthven.

Lord George and she talked then for a few minutes of India, and found that they had much in common. Mrs. Ruthven looked about her seeking Gerald, but the Ventnors had not yet put in an appearance. The Norfolk girl nodded and smiled. Hartford leant against a pillar and looked gloomy. Mrs. Ruthven felt her youngest and wished to dance. The music tempted her. One of the Hungarian bands was playing, and a waltz swung in the air. Lord George took her to see the ball-room. It was a great white room hung with blue, and lighted by electric light. A few people were dancing, but not many.

"It takes supper to make young London dance," Lord George explained. "They will wake up presently. Still, this is winter, and they have small excuse for being lazy. Shall we set an example?"

They went twice round the room, then Lord George complained good-humoredly of his increasing stoutness. He was possibly not many years older than Mrs. Ruthven, but she looked, for to-night at least, as if she might have been his daughter. She saw him and herself in a looking-glass and noted this.

"I believe," she said to herself, "that in the end I shall grow old in a day. I shall shrivel up like *She*. Something must happen to me. I cannot go on for ever."

Gerald was standing in the doorway. Miss Ventnor made her way to Mrs. Ruthven at once. She was full of her disappointment. Mrs. Ruthven assured her that the disappointment was her own and Araby's. But women are quick in their judgments of women, and something in Mrs. Ruthven's tone as she spoke of her daughter struck Miss Ventnor. She mentioned Araby again tentatively and remarked it once more. It suggested impatience and indifference. Miss Ventnor jumped to a conclusion that in its accuracy did her wits no little credit. At the same moment her host claimed her attention, and Gerald took her place. There flashed across Mrs. Ruthven as she greeted him the recollection of the sound of the bolting and the locking of the door on the previous night. She wondered what he would think if she were to tell him of the restlessness that had

possessed her and that had driven her to walk for relief. But she had no thought of telling him; she was content to wonder.

They stood and watched the dancing for a few minutes, and then moved to where they commanded a view of the band.

The whole volume of the swinging waltz seemed to come from the violin of the conductor. The swaying of his head and of his body had a part in the measure of the music.

"Let us dance," said Gerald, much as the prayer-book says, "Let us pray."

They danced. Mrs. Ruthven was light and supple. She laughed and said that she had danced last in India. That seemed a long time ago.

Mrs. Ruthven nodded.

"I have a good deal to say to you," she said.

He left her presently and Hartford took his place. She kept him rigorously to the impersonal. She had no need just then of his devotion to tell her that her charm was potent. She saw it in the eyes of all who looked at her.

People were asking about her. She recognized in the crowd one or two faces that she knew. Lady George made much of her—a clever woman Lady George, who was never jealous, and who cared so truly for her stout and good-tempered husband that she devoted herself to whomsoever he might chance

to admire. She called it "managing" him. The result of her system was patent to every one. There was not a pair in London united by a more solid and lasting attachment than Lord and Lady George Athol.

"It was so very good of you not to stand on ceremony," Lady George said to Mrs. Ruthven.

Mrs. Ruthven explained with her smile that she was not of the sort that stands upon anything so uncomfortable.

"We shall like each other," said Lady George.

Mrs. Ruthven saw a ladder to success in London. She began to wonder now whether it would not be worth her while to ascend it. Questions of course would be asked from time to time about her husband. She need not, however, confess that the indifference which had for so many years reigned between them had now given place to an intoleration which made a life together impossible.

Araby would be a help to her, but then Araby was Araby. This brought her back to Gerald, and Gerald at this moment came to claim her for supper.

They made their way together through the drawing-rooms and across the square landing, where Lady George received her guests, and down the wide stairs to the dining-room. Gerald secured a secluded table. Mrs. Ruthven looked round. Miss Norfolk and Hartford came into the room, and made their

way first to the long table that ran across the end of it. Miss Norfolk demurred. Hartford took an indolent survey of the smaller tables and said that there wasn't a seat, and that they would have to stand.

Miss Norfolk, however, was not to be done out of a *tete-a-tete* supper, and she reconnoitred for herself. She saw a sister in a corner, and leaving Hartford she went over to her to see what stage in the supper she had reached.

"Couldn't you make your man eat a little faster?" she whispered.

Her sister promised with a suppressed giggle, and not many minutes later Miss Norfolk and Hartford sat facing each other across a very tempting menu.

"An example of what you call *esprit de corps,*" said Miss Norfolk to herself. "Ethel is a dear girl, and I will do the same for her some day."

She set herself then to the consumption of chicken and champagne and the conquest of Hartford. The chicken was tender, but Hartford was tough.

"A girl who deserves to get on," said Mrs. Ruthven to Gerald. "Who was it said that the mothers of Belgravia toiled all night and caught nothing? It strikes me that some of the daughters work just as hard."

Gerald said something about fishers of men. There was a pleasant click of knives and forks. Mrs.

Ruthven ate little and slowly. She watched the sparkling bubbles that rose in her champagne. There was a distant sound of dancing and of music, and now and then of the wheels of the carriage of an arriving or a departing guest. The centre of each table was adorned with violets, and the scent of them hung in the air. It arrested Mrs. Ruthven's attention presently and took her back to the night before, and thence to the night before that. She was not quite certain yet what she should say to Gerald. While she was hesitating he asked her what she had to tell him.

"You said you had something to say to me."

Mrs. Ruthven raised her eyes slowly.

"It was to thank you for looking after Araby for me."

He said that it had been pleasant to look after her, as Mrs. Ruthven called it, that Miss Ruthven skated with unusual excellence.

"But I am not talking of Wimbledon," said Mrs. Ruthven, "nor of yesterday at all, for the matter of that."

"What then?" said Gerald lightly. He emptied his glass and refilled it.

"Why didn't you tell me where you were going?" Mrs. Ruthven said quietly.

Gerald flushed a little when he gathered her meaning, but he was not disconcerted. It would not have

been easy to rob him of the self-possession that was his birthright.

"It would have been making a fuss about such a very small thing, wouldn't it?" he said, smiling. "I wasn't very long, and I had the satisfaction of knowing that I had put Miss Ruthven into a safe cab."

Mrs. Ruthven had intended to tell him herself of the misstatement she had made to Araby, but when it came to the time she found herslf unable to make up her mind to risk the chance of his displeasure. This showed, by the way, how differently she dealt with different people. She read character easily and quickly, and the chief hold she had had over the man who had given her the ring of ill-luck had been her power to make him angry.

Gerald was easy-going and good-tempered, and she hesitated to tell him that which might raise his blood. So she waited, and she talked of other things.

CHAPTER XII.

Miss Norfolk had a theory, whether consciously gleaned from Thackeray or not I cannot say, that any woman with patience and tact, especially tact, can make any man marry her. She aired this idea with others that were more or less advanced in the work-room at the top of the house in Sloane Street.

She had an antagonistic sister somewhere amongst the five girls who stood to her in that relationship, and that sister said—

"Well, and why don't you do it yourself?"

This caused three of the other girls, together with the maid with the sewing-machine and the pair of large scissors, to giggle. The maid was so important a person in this house of lady-tailors that she was privileged.

"I shall in good time," said Miss Norfolk, composedly.

Netty, the pert sister, affected not to hear.

"Did you say," she asked, threading her needle, "did you say,—get out of the light, Anne, I can't see,—did you say that it took a good time?"

Old jokes pass muster in large families.

"I gave you as much help as I could last night," said Ethel. She was working button-holes and she bit her cotton.

"You'll spoil your teeth, miss," said the maid, holding up a finger of solemn warning. "However many times must I tell you that? I knew a young girl myself as wore hers to stumps through nothing else but biting thread."

"Oh, I know all about that young person," said Ethel. "She died, didn't she, Robson, from swallowing the ends of the thread that she bit off?"

"They twisted themselves round her heart, Miss Ethel,—I should run a gusset there, Miss Anne,—and she suffered tortures through having to lay on a sofa for years owing to an injury done to the spine of her back when a child."

Robson's speeches were masterly examples of *non sequitur*.

"It ought to be a warning to me," said Ethel. "Netty, give me the needle you have just threaded for yourself. Your eyes are a year younger than mine."

Netty grumbled good-humoredly.

"And you know how I hate threading needles," she said.

"But not for me," said Ethel, sweetly.

The tongues were silent then for a few minutes. The noise of the sewing-machine throbbed in the air

like a fevered pulse. There was the sound of the drawing of a quick needle with its attendant cotton through silk. Miss Norfolk was cutting out on a table by the aid of paper patterns. The scissors made a curious noise against the wood. An iron stood against a small gas-stove. A pile of ladies' fashion papers lay on the floor.

Anne rose presently and measured some calico with her finger. She cut an opening into it of about an inch and began to tear it. It gave out an excruciating sound which called forth a chorus of indignation, and sent the hands of all except the maid to their ears.

"If you do that again I'll scrag you," cried Netty. "I don't quite know what it means, but I'll do it."

Barbara said Anne was a Perfect Pig. Anne retorted by tearing another length of calico. There was a commotion then, during which Robson implored convulsively for peace, declaring that she knew the iron would be knocked down, and that she had known a house burnt to the ground through the upsetting of a paraffin lamp.

It was some minutes before order was restored.

"And how did you help Harry last night?" asked Netty of Ethel, when once more a voice could make itself heard.

"Well, you see, Harry was on the Hartford chase last night," said Ethel, looking from Netty,

who folded her arms and put down her work to listen, to Miss Norfolk, who went on complacently cutting out, "and after some difficulty in keeping him out of the coverts with Mrs. Ruthven, she ran him into the supper-room."

"Feed men," said Netty, who took her goods where she found them.

"It's rather vulgar of you to put it that way," said Ethel.

"You are both vulgar," said Miss Norfolk, "horribly vulgar," but she laughed.

"It is in the blood, you know," said Netty. "Mamma may say what she likes, but we're not the Norfolk Norfolks really. I don't believe we are even distant connections. Papa came from the States, and made his money——"

"Lost his money," corrected Ethel.

"Yes, lost his money in tinned eels. And we have never heard of a grandfather. I believe his father died before he was born—his mother too I dare say, if one knew the truth."

"Oh, Miss Netty," said the maid, "you will have your bit of fun. You do say things a treat."

"Enfin, continuez, Mademoiselle," said Netty, in the words and the intonation of a quondam governess.

"Well, there wasn't a table to feed him at," said Ethel, "and so I hurried up my partner—told him

that I was engaged for the next dance and wanted to dance it, and in my unselfishness left half my meringue—and you know, Netty, how I adore meringues—and I gave her my place, and she fed him for half an hour, and then he didn't speak."

"But you know *any* woman can marry *any* man," said Netty.

Miss Norfolk, or Harry as she was called at home, smiled complacently to herself and continued to cut out.

"It would be dull up here, wouldn't it," she said abstractedly, "if I didn't give you something to talk about? I wonder how this arm-hole ought to be cut. Come here, Robson, and tell me. No, Ethel, go on with your button-holes, I didn't ask you."

"And it's well I came, miss," said the maid when she had inspected Miss Norfolk's operations. "You'd have spoilt a piece of good stuff if you'd gone on. The pattern's wrong itself."

In this way, and like many others, passed the morning succeeding the dance in Barn Street. Sometimes one or other of this family of good girls stretched her arms or pricked her finger, and spoke a small swear-word or gave a little cry. There would have been, that is to say, a certain monotony in the hours spent in the work-room but for the exuberance of the spirits of the workers. Mrs. Norfolk gave her daughters all the fun that she could afford,

and in return they had to do their own dressmaking and hers.

Having failed to get, as she would have expressed it, a rise out of her elder sister, Netty of the pert mouth and the mischievous eyes turned upon Anne.

The Norfolk girls were all big and healthy, and of long and well-covered limbs, with the exception of Anne, the youngest. She had the family neatness of build but on a smaller scale, and the family complexion too, so far as the fineness of the texture of her skin went, but while the others had glowing colors she was pale. Where her sisters were assertive she was retiring. She was sensitive and observant. She saw indeed far too deeply into the heart and into the meaning of things for her own comfort. Under different conditions—had she, for example, been an only child—it is not improbable that she would have been morbid, and possibly hysterical, but the combined influences of her five robust sisters kept her from any prolonged brooding. She was not thought pretty at home, partly of course because the others were so much bolder in outline and coloring; but in the studios to which her art education took her she received a homage which satisfied her, and which told her that her looks in the house in Sloane Street were not appreciated merely because they were not understood.

"If they knew," she said sometimes to herself, with an indrawing of her breath.

She seldom went with her sisters into the society which they loved. She had her own friends in such impossible parts of London as West Kensington and Regent's Park and Maida Vale, and she dressed in a way that seemed odd to all Pilotell-girls. Painting and study occupied much of her time. She devoted herself and her thoughts to art, but at this period her thoughts were inclined to wander. She worked patiently, and she had already been rewarded by the hanging of two of her pictures in good positions at minor exhibitions—a reward that was enhanced by the sale of the painting in both cases.

She was the reading one of the family, and the bookshelves of her little bedroom showed a curious variety of literature. Possibly the fact that stout Mrs. Norfolk never troubled her head at all as to what her girls put into theirs did not tend to make this variety less various. Anne's own taste was for the most part her protection. Indeed so little training had fallen to the share of the Miss Norfolks, that it was a matter of wonder to all who knew their mother that they should have turned out so well. For they were good girls, from the advanced Harry, who liked occasionally to affect outrageousness, to the quiet Anne.

"Anne," said Netty, addressing her sisters, "is unusually brilliant this morning."

"What is it, Anne?" said Ethel.

"Cheer up, Anne," said Harry.

"Tell us all about it, Anne," said Netty.—"Really," she added in parenthesis, "making dresses for mamma becomes more difficult every year. If things go on like this her waist will soon be over the top of her head. It is an awful lookout for us, girls. Mamma was once as slight as Anne. Anne, your artist won't want to paint you if you become bulky."

Mrs. Norfolk derived in her good-tempered way so much amusement from her own increasing size, that to jest upon the subject was legitimate in Sloane Street.

Anne went on quietly with her work, but her needle trembled. The sunlight falling on her pale hair lit it up and showed its fineness. It was thick and dry, but shining, and she dressed it very simply. Her eyes were gray and large. Behind her was the blue background of the paper of the wall, and on this the sun struck too, throwing her shadow upon it so definitely in profile that her eyelashes were given as in a silhouette.

Miss Norfolk, looking at her young sister sitting thus, and bending over her work in the winter sunlight, came at that moment near to understanding why it was Anne—and not herself, nor Ethel, nor Netty, nor Barbara and Helen, the twins—who on three occasions had been begged by painters of note to sit to them.

Mrs. Norfolk, though she was really fond of her youngest daughter, always said apologetically and ungrammatically that it was because Anne knew "those sort" of people.

But Miss Norfolk, I say, realized at this moment that that was not perhaps altogether the reason.

"We," she said to herself, as the result of her observation, "we—and particularly myself—are creatures of the moment. If we didn't change, and keep ourselves what they call at the Gaiety up to date, we should be out of fashion next year. But Anne is somehow permanent—as a—as a Greuze is permanent."

Miss Norfolk paused before the painter's name, to find in her very superficial knowledge of art or artists one that should fit the case. She was more happy in the example that came to her than perhaps she altogether knew.

A sudden recollection of Araby Ruthven told her that much the same thing applied to her also, and, while she wondered whether there was anything in common between the two girls, she continued almost unconsciously to gaze at Anne.

Netty, idle now, and in a mood for mischief, with a recurrent use of the Christian name which experience had taught her was a source of almost certain irritation to its owner—any Christian name and any owner—continued to exhort Anne to be of good cheer.

"Bear up, Anne," she said, "bear up. Remember the comfortable words of your elder sister Harry, that any woman with patience and tact, especially tact, can marry any man. She hasn't quite succeeded herself, you know, Anne. But she will in good time, Anne; and so will you, Anne, if you try, Anne. *Any* woman, *any* man, Anne."

There was no answer.

"Anne!"

"Yes, Netty."

"Are you cross?"

"Not yet, Netty."

"Then I'll make you," said Netty. "What do you think I've found out, girls?"

Anne gave her sister an agonized look. But Netty in her present mood was adamant.

"Anne's in love," said Netty—"in love with Dennis Leigh."

It was Miss Norfolk who caught her breath.

CHAPTER XIII.

And the cause of this sudden and small sign of possible feeling upon the part of Miss Norfolk was the mention of the name of a young barrister with little money and no briefs.

He shared chambers with an equally impecunious friend, in Testament Buildings in the Temple, and here the two young men feasted and fasted as circumstances permitted or ordained.

Dennis had an allowance of a hundred a year from an uncle, who stated definitely that this was all that he could do for him, and the friend had scarcely as much. A joint income of barely two hundred a year was then all that was assured to a pair of boisterous fellows full of life and the love of it.

Dennis hated London and damned it roundly. He wanted to hunt, and to shoot, and to fish, and to live in the open air.

Abbot the friend said, "Oh, damn y'r hunting, and y'r shooting, and y'r fishing, and y'r open air; London's not a bad sort of place all round, if you've enough to eat and especially drink, and can afford a good tailor, and can take your amusements as

amusements, without having to sit up half the night to write about them afterwards."

For these unhappy young men trod the stony bye-ways of journalism, and earned there, by dint of a work that was only made tolerable by the fact that it brought in its train such advantages as a free entry into theatres and the like, a sum sufficient to keep them. Dennis was clean-shaven, as became his would-be calling, and he had a profile that delighted you, but a full-face that was disappointing. He was an Oxford man, by the kindness of the uncle, and he looked back to his three years there as the happiest in his life.

He was clever. He took to writing, and wrote well in a form that he despised. He took to it not because he liked it, but as a means of adding to his very slender income. He knew that he was built for things better than two weekly London letters, which brought him in a pound apiece, a certain amount of hurried literary criticism, and such dramatic press-work as Abbot, whose particular line was the theatre, and all that appertained to it, handed over to him. He cursed London as the home of his fettered life.

Then there came a day when London underwent a change for him. It would be difficult to say exactly why he succumbed to the charms of Abbot's cousin, Miss Norfolk. It was a year now since that winter day, when there was a laughing and a talking on

the staircase of Testament Buildings, followed by a knocking at the joint door of Abbot and Leigh.

It was Leigh who opened it. Netty nudged Ethel (Dennis saw her), and Miss Norfolk, in a voice that somehow conveyed to the young barrister that at the end of an argument she had been deputed spokeswoman, asked whether Mr. Abbot was at home.

Mr. Abbot was at home. The girls walked in with demureness. Leigh saw Netty nudge Ethel again. Miss Norfolk was preternaturally solemn, but Dennis had a conviction that she wanted to laugh. She did when presently Abbot had received his cousins and introduced his friend to them.

"We have often threatened you with a visit," said Miss Norfolk, "and to-day mamma took the twins to an 'at home' somewhere, and Anne was painting, and Ethel and Netty and I were so dull—oh, do let me have the cup without a handle—that when Ethel proposed——"

"I didn't," said Ethel.

"Well then, Netty——"

"Nor I," said Netty.

"Well, when *I* proposed—yes, and sugar, please, thank you, Mr. Leigh—proposed bearding you in your den, Jimmy, they all jumped at it, and here we are. And is that where you keep your briefs—in that cupboard? Is it big enough? And what lovely muffins. Couldn't we help you to toast them? And

do you receive your clients here—do you call them clients? And shall we be taken for clients? They will think we are breach of promise girls."

"So this is really the Temple," said Ethel. "I thought it would have been dustier."

"But you have laundresses, who keep it clean for you, haven't you?" said Netty, "and you marry their daughter in the third act."

"Look at all their papers," said Miss Norfolk, taking up a copy of the *Bachelor,* to which Dennis was an occasional contributor. "The *Bachelor,* the *Enu,* the *Lamp,* the *Gun.*" She ran through a few of the names of journals that lay upon the table.

"I had no idea you had time for anything so interesting. I thought there would only be dreadful law papers like——"

"*The Police News,*" said Netty. She had once seen the sheet in a small newsagent's in a back street.

Abbot asked Leigh to say something that should uphold the dignity of the law.

This tea-party was the first of many. Abbot, who often dined in Sloane Street, was asked to bring Dennis. He went. Netty and Ethel amused him; to the twins he was indifferent; Anne looking at him shyly, interested him; but of Miss Norfolk he carried back to the Temple an impression that made him happy and miserable.

Abbot said—

"Harry Norfolk is a good-looking girl, old chap, but don't you singe your precious wings there. If she wasn't so young, Dennis, I should call her a bit of an old soldier."

"Get out," said Leigh, morosely.

"And my good aunt is a schemer if ever there was one," added Abbot, sententiously.

Dennis found London growing dear to him. It held Sloane Street, and Sloane Street held his divinity. He placed Miss Norfolk possibly upon a pedestal that was unreasonably high. He looked forward to her visits to the Temple and to his own to Chelsea. In the intervals he worked hard. Sometimes when he saw her, he found Miss Norfolk's eyes upon him, and afterwards he liked to think of that. Sometimes it helped him, sometimes it hindered.

In the year that succeeded the making of her acquaintance, his pen brought him in two hundred pounds. Putting aside the fixed remuneration for his two London letters, the rest had come in small sums ranging from half a guinea to five pounds. His heart sank within him when he realized what labor this had cost him, and that this year had been, as years ago, a very good year. Abbot had not done so well, but Abbot did not mind drifting, and Dennis did; Abbot lived in the present, Dennis had begun to face the future. He was elated and de-

spondent by turns. Life seemed to him a good thing, and life seemed to him a curse. And Harry Norfolk looked at him curiously when she thought that he did not see her, and distantly at other times. She asked Abbot many questions about him.

"The best chap that ever lived," said Abbot.

He was devoted to his friend in a brusque and undemonstrative sort of way, and behind his back he liked to sing his praises.

"And he is an orphan, didn't you say?" asked Miss Norfolk.

She knew that he had not said so, but she wished for information.

"An only son and an orphan," replied her cousin.

Miss Norfolk, thinking of the Norfolk dowery that had to be split up into six, said that it was something to be an only anything—son or daughter.

"Hasn't made much difference in his case," said Abbot. "That's the devil of it. There was nothing to leave. He has a rich uncle, who put him generously to Oxford, and makes him now a small allowance."

"The same thing," said Miss Norfolk.

"It might be," agreed Abbot, "but that the uncle, an old Johnny of sixty, has married a young wife, and has now a son of his own."

"How annoying," said Harry.

She could not have said less if she had dropped her prayer-book on the wood pavement of Sloane Street, or pricked her finger, or knocked her white elbow; but she set her teeth after she had said it and she sighed. Abbot remarked nothing. He felt vaguely that that which he had told his cousin of his friend was mischief to the friend.

"And there," he said to himself in an habitual expression, "is the devil of it."

Miss Norfolk often set her teeth after that, and looked at herself in the glass to note the tragedy of her expression. She was very much interested in finding that she had such feelings as she had read of in books. Sometimes, when she was not acting to an audience of a mirror with herself in it, her face wore a look that was very hopeless, and that bore an impress of truth that showed that there was a certain depth in the emotions, the outward expression of which she liked to counterfeit.

She met Hartford. She was more shrewd and worldly-wise than ever, robbed herself designedly of much of the freshness of her youth by acquiring, or pretending to, a knowledge of life that may have been harmless in its results, but that amazed such less modern girls as Araby; and she went more seldom to the Temple, and looked more distantly at Dennis.

He did not fail to observe the change. It made him acutely miserable. Abbot was very sorry for

him, but to tell him that Miss Norfolk (in her cousin's opinion) was not worth his thought of her would not have seemed to Dennis kind or friendly comfort. He was more silent, and he worked desperately by fits and starts, with intervals, during which he cursed his fate, and flung his pen to an end of the room whither he would presently follow it to pick it up apologetically. Then the whole thing struck him as rather ludicrous, and he laughed at himself.

Miss Norfolk and Ethel had gone, as we know, to Lady George Athol's dance, and it was to keep themselves fresh for this that they threw up an engagement to have tea with the two young barristers in Testament Buildings.

"Anne, you must go instead of me," said Miss Norfolk. "They asked three of us, and Netty and Barbara are going."

Anne drew back.

"You ought to go yourself, Harry," she said, timidly. "You know you promised, and—they will be awfully disappointed."

"Oh," said Miss Norfolk, hardly, "all engagements are subject to the turning up of something better afterwards."

"You are unjust—to yourself," said Anne.

Miss Norfolk made as if she would have retorted impatiently, but she did not.

"You won't expect justice even from yourself when you reach my age, Anne," she said with a sigh.

Anne still demurred about going.

"Why don't you want to go?" asked Netty, who had not then definitely made her discovery. "Don't you like Jimmy and Mr. Leigh?"

Anne colored and made an excuse. She wanted to work at a picture.

"Rot," said Netty, robustly.

In the end Anne gave way. She had often been before to the chambers in the Temple, but of late, with the wandering of her thoughts, reasons had been made plain to her why she should go there as little as possible. Anne, you see, was observant.

She had still a heightened color when she followed her sisters, Netty and Barbara, into the omnibus, which the fact of living in a thoroughfare enabled the Norfolks to stop at their own door.

"Where's Harry?" asked Abbot, when the girls presented themselves at his chambers.

Netty made a long and glib statement of plausible excuse. Anne saw the face of Dennis fall, and she turned away her head.

"Too bad of Harry," said Abbot. "Tell her, with my love, Netty, that her regrets are very pretty, but that I am quite sure she could have come if she had liked."

The party settled themselves round the fire. A

kettle was singing merrily, and presently an issue of steam came from its spout. Anne helped Dennis to make the tea, by which I mean that she held the brown earthenware teapot in one hand, and the lid of it in the other, while he poured in the boiling water. It made an indescribable sound.

He put down the kettle and took the teapot from her, barely thanking her. His eyes were holden at this time.

She began methodically to cut bread for toasting. Netty talked so much that she could do nothing else, and to have expected Barbara to help would have been to expect the unlikely. The twins had eyes with heavy lids and did nothing for themselves. Their indolence, which was partly natural and partly affected, had a real and physical expression in their cast of face. They spoke slowly with deep voices. They were like each other in appearance, and Barbara was representative. Their sloth was in Sloane Street pronounced to suit their type of beauty, and they were exempted from many of those small duties which developed upon the others.

Anne and Jimmy knelt in front of the fire and made toast; Netty offered to help but did not move. Barbara looked on lazily and did nothing. Dennis was silent. After he had placed the teapot on the hob he sat down. Anne saw the grimness of his expression. It relaxed presently, and his normal

geniality asserted itself. To mope for long was foreign to his nature.

Abbot and Anne moved after a time from their kneeling positions. Their faces glowed from the heat of the fire, and Anne's eyes sparkled.

"We've done our share, Anne," said Jimmy. "Some of the others must take a turn next."

"I'm sure you have made plenty of toast," said the lazy Barbara. She sniffed the air luxuriously. "How good it smells!"

She watched Dennis, who proceeded to butter it. Anne took off her hat and stood at the table. The firelight burnished her shining hair.

"Why, you have got a piano," she said suddenly.

"I have been wondering what made the room look different from usual," said Netty. "When did you get it, Jimmy?"

"Leigh's piano, not mine," said Abbot. "Dennis, old chap, hurry up, we all want our tea."

Anne went over to the instrument.

"Yes, try it, Miss Norfolk," said Dennis, but Barbara protested.

"After we've had some tea," she said, in the slow deep voice that gave to so many trite or commonplace things a tone of tragedy. The twins' voices were somewhat wasted upon them.

Barbara made a hearty meal, slowly. Netty talked, and for some reason or other observed Anne, who was silent. Anne ate little.

"Now," said Leigh, when at last Barbara had refused anything more, and the toast had disappeared from the plate, "now will you try the piano?"

Anne rose at once. She did not speak, and she began Chopin's *Nocturne* in E flat. Dennis had followed her to the piano. He stood beside it as she played. She became very pale. After a time the strain of the knowledge that his eyes were upon her became too severe, and she looked up. He was looking at her steadily, but she scarcely thought that he saw her. She played the piece to the end.

Netty, the mischievous, continued to watch her, drawing the while her own conclusions.

Dennis, thinking of Harry Norfolk, at whose suggestion he had acquired the piano, was deeply moved by the music. He said little. Abbot knew the effect which music had upon him, and hastened in a boisterous way to demand something less classic.

"Something down to our level, Anne. The *Pas de* what-you-call-it. Here, Netty, you and I will hop round."

Anne complied at once. She was a little bit alarmed by the passion which her playing had called up into Leigh's face, and it was a relief to rattle from the notes the swinging tune that took London.

Abbot pushed the table out of the way, and caught Netty by the hand. The two skipped round, Netty's neat feet taking steps scarcely less precise than those

of the dancing girl's. The air and the motion were intoxicating. The indolent Barbara jumped up and called upon Dennis to dance. Then these four, full of their youth, and with spirits that rose in answer to the exuberance of the tune, hopped round till they were out of breath.

When they were at last sitting in different parts of the room, and fanning themselves with their pocket-handkerchiefs or with newspapers, Anne left the piano.

Barbara said it was time to go, and did not move. Netty said that she supposed so too, but kept her place. Abbot and Leigh protested that there was no hurry.

"You must tell Harry," said Abbot, "that we have had our ball this afternoon."

Anne looked at Dennis apprehensively, and then she took up the current copy of the *Bachelor,* which chanced to be lying on the table. She looked for such articles as bore the initials D. L. Her eye fell upon some verses. They were unsigned. Dennis happened to be near her as she read them. They were a love song. She looked from them to Dennis, and knew that he had written them. Netty read them over her shoulder and guessed the same thing, and when that night she found Anne with a copy of the paper which she had bought, crying over them in her own room, she made the discovery which she boldly proclaimed the following day.

CHAPTER XIV.

ARABY had an uneventful and cold journey during which she read when she was tired of looking out at the white country, and looked out again at the snow when she was tired of reading. She cried too a little when she had the carriage to herself, and thoughts of Gerald assailed her.

The guard came at intervals and saw that she was comfortable. He brought sandwiches to her, and he had the foot-warmer changed for her. She slept sometimes and she dreamed disturbingly. There was little indeed to distract her. She had fellow-travelers intermittently, but none of them aroused in her the smallest interest. A large woman with an infinitesimal dog with an aggressively shrill bark bored her. She speculated a little, but with no keenness, as to a young couple with new luggage. Three old men with black bands on their hats and black gloves appeared to have made up a party to go to a funeral. They called it the " interment," and they talked about it a good deal, and Araby was relieved when they left the carriage.

The evening closed in. Lights occasionally dotted

the white country. Fields and hedges and trees looked desolate. The cold increased, and after a time the damp upon the windows froze itself into patterns of ferns and leaves which effectually obscured the passing landscape.

Araby was asleep at the moment of the train's arrival at the station for Eccram, and she started to her feet as the lights flashed past the carriage windows. She was stiff and cold, and for once the sight of the familiar platform awoke in her no feelings of welcome recognition. The Eccram carriage was waiting for her. The coachman grinned all over his face as he touched his hat and respectfully greeted her.

During the drive to the house Araby tried hard to experience some of the joy with which in thought she had associated a return to the home of her childhood. She knew every yard of the road, and in the whiteness of the winter night she distinguished all the old landmarks. It was useless. Her heart was in London, and she wondered how she should get through her days.

"It will be all right when I see Aunt Laura and Aunt Clara," she told herself.

They met her as she expected in the hall. The welcome was so genuine and so warm that something of comfort was conveyed to her. They were gaunt women with good hearts and high cheekbones. Neither of them looked as if she had ever

been young. Araby, indeed, who had lived with them from her earliest days, had never known them to change. They were examples of permanent middle age. They dressed in a way that denoted a certain type of feminine mind, following the fashions with timidity and at a respectful distance.

Like a soldier under arrest Araby was escorted between them into the dining-room, where the huge fire that threw shafts of flickering light upon the walls made her suddenly conscious of how cold she was physically. She ran to the hearth and knelt down upon the fur rug and stretched out her hands to the blaze. The warmth and the brightness cheered her. She felt a wish to purr like the cat that lay curled up on the bearskin beside her. Incidently she realized the want of that form of exquisite expression.

The aunts were talking to her the while singly and in chorus. Would she like to go to her room and take off her coat and her hat before her supper or afterwards?

She roused herself with an effort. The glow of the hearth, which made her fingers to tingle deliciously, was lulling her to a delightful state of languor. London with all that it held was forgotten in the enchantment of pleasure bodily sensation. The world was herself, the fire, and the purring cat. She laid her face luxuriously for a moment against

the animal's coat. It was soft, thick, silky, and hot. Then she rose to her feet.

"The old room?" she said. "My little blue room?"

"Yes, dear. Your own room. We thought you would like that. It is just as you left it."

Simultaneously the eyes of the aunts filled with tears. No one but they themselves knew what it had been to them to lose Araby.

"I hope you are a little bit glad to come back," one of them said.

Araby's heart smote her. She threw her arms round the speaker's neck.

"Glad!" she said, "glad! Oh, my dear aunt Laura, don't you know that I am glad?"

When she had gone up to her room the two ladies were silent for a few moments. Each waited for the other to speak. Laura, the younger, at last said,

"Well?"

That loosed her sister's tongue.

"Did you think her pale?—paler than she used to be?"

"Her journey . . . . the cold——"

"Would account for that partly. Perhaps. Yes."

There was silence again. Miss Wootton changed her position somewhat, and opened her mouth to

speak. Her sister looked at her, and she closed her lips.

The butler came in to know whether he should bring in Araby's supper.

"We will ring," said Miss Wootton. "Miss Araby has gone to her room."

The servant withdrew, and there was again silence.

"She is as pretty as ever," said Miss Laura then. "Prettier. She has filled out. She is no longer a child. Perhaps that is it."

"Is what, Laura? Do you see any alteration in her?"

"Yes, I do."

The two sisters exchanged glances, and there was again silence. Miss Wootton broke it.

"Did you—did you miss something from her manner, Laura?"

"I shouldn't like to say that. But there is some change. You see it yourself, Clara. Do you think that she isn't happy?"

"What are you thinking, Laura? Do speak straight out. You are beating about the bush."

"We are thinking the same thing," said Miss Laura then, "you and I; we are both thinking the same thing. We are wondering whether Corbet's wife is a good mother."

"Hush," said Miss Wootton, "hush!"

Miss Laura gave her head a little toss, and in the silence that ensued, during which the sisters sat staring into the fire, Araby came into the room. She went over and knelt on the rug between them, and each took possession of one of her hands.

She began to know now that she was hungry, and when she was comfortably seated at the table, she found herself able to do full justice to the hot and tempting dishes that had been prepared for her. The food of which she had been really in need after her cold journey, and perhaps the port which her aunts insisted that she should drink, did much to raise her spirits. After Araby was refreshed the Miss Woottons led her to the drawing-room.

This was a room which belonged to the worsted-work period. Here they talked till the striking of a clock warned them of the lateness of the hour; and when the three parted for the night, the aunts wondered whether after all they might not have been mistaken in ascribing any change to the girl who had left them, and had now for a time returned to them.

But long after their eyes had closed in sleep Araby sat before the fire in her room and thought. Sometimes as she looked round at the familiar blue walls, and the hundred well-known objects about her, she felt as if she had never been away from Eccram in her life, and that London and her mother and—and other people, must belong to a dream from which she

had just awoke. Then, as she looked, she found the pictures which she had once admired crude and philistine, and she constrasted the comfortable but ugly worsted-work drawing-room with the rooms in Primate Street, and with such other modern rooms as she had seen in London, and she felt that, like Eve, she had eaten of the Tree of knowledge of good and evil, and that for her the old conditions were impossible. She shuddered as she looked at the books on her shelves, at an illumination in an Oxford frame that hung over her bed.

She went to the window and drew aside the curtains. The trees were etched against the white of the snow in firm black lines. Araby could see single twigs. She could see the tower of Eccram Church, and the gables near it of the Vicarage. She thought of Herbert Pine, and wondered whether he was at home; and then she drifted back upon attendant memories connected with skating, to London and to Gerald, and to her mother and to her own unhappiness. They were dancing now in Barn Street. Who was dancing with Gerald? she wondered. What were the waltzes that would be played? She threw herself with intenseness of purpose into an attempt to realize the night as it was passing at the George Athols'. She lived through a part of this ball in imagination. She tried to smell the flowers that would decorate the stairs and

the rooms, and to see the men and women passing to and fro. Gerald was dancing or was not dancing. He was talking to a dark girl or to a fair girl. He was at supper perhaps now. She looked at her watch. It was half-past twelve.

The fire was falling low in the grate. The house was silent. The hush of the country after the rumble of London smote her with a fresh regret. She sighed, and began to undress. When at length she was ready to get into bed a curious impulse made her draw her nightdress down, and gaze in the glass at her white neck and arms. She was splendidly white, and so prettily rounded that she smiled with pleasure at her beauty.

She sighed again, and got into bed. The firelight had ceased to flicker on the blue walls, and the dead embers were ceasing even to crack softly in the grate, when at length Araby fell asleep, and tears were lying like dewdrops upon her eyelashes.

CHAPTER XV.

ECCRAM was a moderately large house standing in a few acres of park, which with the gardens at the back comprised the estate. There were no farms or lands, pasture or otherwise, and it was for the compactness of the place that thirty years ago the Miss Woottons, entering on their permanent middle age at a time when other women are still girls, had bought it, to live in it their kindly and monotonous lives.

They had furnished it massively in the taste of the time. The dining-room, comfortable, substantial, and handsome, had suffered least in a decade remarkable for its lack of artistic appreciation. It was hung with engraved portraits of our Royal Family. The drawing-room, a room the shape of which was full of possibilities, labored as we know at disadvantage under a weight of worsted-work and antimacassars. It had a round table in the middle, with a cloth of crimson velvet pile, on which were ranged books, a paper-knife, a stereoscope with views of Switzerland and Northern Italy (the memento of a foreign tour), and two albums con-

taining photographs of people of those varying forms of ugliness that are in part at least due to the fashions of a time when women called Clara and Laura were girls, and men were spoken of as the gentlemen. On a marble-topped book-case a stuffed kingfisher dived into a little pool of looking-glass; and there were other abominations of the kind. There were some comfortable chairs; there were two prim sofas, and there were hard cushions worked with beads or wool and ornamented with tassels and fringes. There were stools too, little round things, six inches high, upon which human foot had never been known to rest. There was a carpet with a huge pattern of vases overflowing with roses. There was a glass chandelier for candles. There were also candlesticks with crystal drops. There was a grand piano which was locked, and a music-stool shaped like a square hour-glass, and worked in worsted. There was an ottoman which opened up and disclosed a chest. There was a marble mantelpiece, and a worked screen upon a folding gilt rod screwed on to one side of it. There were many other ornaments dating alike from the Stone Age of decoration.

The house itself, built of red brick, low-roofed, and with a square porch, was old and delightful. It had crooked oak-stairs, with elaborately carved balustrades. You went up a couple of steps into

some of the rooms, you went down into others. You were surprised at every corner. But the eternal feminine evinced itself in all the appointments, and Araby, who up to a few months back had lived there for nearly fourteen years, now, after a brief interval, became conscious of it. She wondered that she had never contrasted the prim lady-like equipments of the rooms with those of such other country houses as she had seen.

Her aunts' shady hats hanging on pegs of the hat-rack in the hall, the croquet set under the table, the large looking-glasses in gold frames, all struck her with a sense of pity for the cramped lives of their owners. The very servants seemed to date as servants from times remote. There was a housemaid with stiff joints and a set of false teeth, which when she smiled reminded Araby of the keyboard of a piano. The butler was self-willed and rheumatic. The cook had confessed to sixty in the recent census. Everywhere indoors was an atmosphere of sedate middle age, and to her own alarm, in the present state of transition of her mind, Araby realized it, and wondered how she had breathed it for so long.

She woke on the morning after her arrival with the sense of something having happened, and looking drowsily at the blue walls of her room, she wondered at the color. Her room in Primate Street

was pink. Then of a sudden the dead silence of the country struck her, and she started up and remembered that she was no longer in London. After that she lay down and allowed her thoughts to wander. The sight of the frozen window, on which the palest rays of a winter sun were glistening till the marvelous patterns seemed wrought in powdered diamonds, made the warmth of the fine white sheets the more grateful, and a delightful sense of ease and rest stole over her. She thought of the false Gerald without pain. Nothing mattered. The stiff housemaid with the keyboard smile came in to light her fire, and Araby woke fully, and knew that she had been banished to Eccram, and that she was miserable. Then the word banished in connection with the kind aunts and her home smote her with remorse, and she was contrite.

When at length she went down to the dining-room she found the aunts at breakfast. They were full of gentle goodness in a minor key. They would not have her called earlier, they said, but they were sure that she would excuse them for having begun without her.

"But of course, dear Aunt Laura," she said smiling. She was a little bit shocked once more when their politeness struck her as elaborate and effete.

"They are so good," she said to herself, "and oh, I am horrid!"

In spite of herself she criticised them. Their figures were so flat, and they wore elastic-sided boots with shining toe-caps.

"I am horrid," she said to herself again.

They noted the smallness of her appetite. They thought her graver than of old, and more reserved. They exchanged glances. She found herself silent and out of touch with such subjects as interested them. She scarcely knew it, but she was shy. They lived in a different world from that in which her lines were now cast, and she had forgotten the simplicity that had been hers when her own life had been bound up with theirs. She was stricken with pity—and with a sense of shame that it should be so—for these two women who had grown old dully, and whose lives ran in so narrow and straight a grove. She felt herself a hypocrite when even by the assent of silence she appeared to agree with one or other of them upon such points of doctrine or demeanor as came up in the ordinary course of conversation. The old order changes, and she had changed with it, and once more she felt that the former conditions were impossible. It was curious how in so short a time, and insensibly, her ideas and views had widened.

After breakfast a dull morning threatened. Araby loitered undecidedly in the hall. She went to the window and looked out across the white park.

A few rooks were walking about on the drive. The black of them struck an insistent note against the snow. They came up close to the house, and looked to Araby of abnormal size. She fetched some bread and tried to interest herself in feeding them. Miss Wootton came out of the library.

"What would you like to do, my dear? Wouldn't you like to go out? I wish we had anything to amuse you. I think they are skating on the park pond, if you would like to go down and see."

Laura Wootton had followed her sister into the hall. She came and stood on Araby's other side. She wore mittens, and her fingers were pink with the cold of the day. Araby was disinclined for anything, but felt that in action only would she find rest from her thoughts. She hailed the suggestion of her aunt with alacrity.

"You will find friends down there, dear," said Miss Wootton. "I saw Herbert and Cora Pine skating yesterday."

Araby went to her room, and whether the mention of the young soldier's name was accountable for it or not, she descended presently thence wearing one of her prettiest hats. She fastened her coat as she came. Her skates swung by the straps over her arm, and made a pleasant clicking sound as the blades struck gently together.

So keen and frosty an air met her as she left the

house that her cheeks glowed in answer to it. The frozen snow gave crisply under her feet and made a sound that pleased her. Her spirits rose. She began to run, and then fell back into a walk.

Eccram stood on high ground, with a dip at the end of the park whence the country stretched itself for square miles with the flatness of a map. In the clearness of the day Araby could see the hedges that made a hundred fields into a huge chessboard. She saw farm-houses and the spire here and there of a church. Behind all and over all, and at the edge it seemed of the world, was a sky of turquoise blue, banked towards the west with fleecy white clouds ranged in rounded shelves one above another. These meant snow. They were dazzling in the pure sunlight.

Presently she was reminded of Wimbledon, her mother, Gerald, and her unhappiness by the sound of blades ringing on the ice. She gave a gesture of impatience and quickened her pace.

Herbert Pine was disporting himself fantastically upon his skates. Five minutes later Araby had flung care to the winds and was swinging through the air beside him. She talked and she laughed. He listened to her in surprise and tried to understand her, with the result that he became more than ever in love with her. Araby saw what she was doing and was reckless.

"Nothing matters," she said to him with young cynicism, in answer to some remark of his, "nothing matters—nothing, nothing, nothing."

He looked at her curiously. Woolwich was knocking his lankiness into shape, and barmaids had told him that he had wicked eyes. His manner at home was less deprecating than of old, and he had told his sister that there was hardly a girl worth speaking to in the county. Cora Pine had tossed her head at the time, but she had not failed to proclaim proudly amongst her bosom friends the sweeping assertion of her tall brother. She might have chuckled if she could have heard his deference to Araby.

"One learns that in London," he said, with an attempt at his grander manner.

He was feeling somehow that Araby, though she talked to him incessantly and skated with no one else, took him pretty much as she had left him, and scarcely realized his importance. This served but the more to increase his infatuation. He stored up much restlessness for himself that day upon the ice of the park pond.

The Pines had brought down luncheon with them and begged Araby to share it. She accepted their invitation, and despatched a lad up to the house with a message. A thousand things reminded her of the other skating party and of Gerald, and for solace she devoted herself to the conquest of a boy in whom

she could now barely interest herself. He walked home with her through the crisp snow in the red sunset. He became sentimental and talked bitterly. At the door he stood still.

"Will you come in?"

He had been wondering all the way from the ice whether or not she would ask this, and whether or not he should consent. But he was in a mood when parting had an attraction for him.

"No, I won't come in," he said without a smile, and then he added "Thank you," as an afterthought.

He was silent for a few moments and Araby put out her hand. There seemed nothing to wait for, but she knew that he wished to detain her.

"Oh, don't go," he said hurriedly.

"Why not?" said Araby with a smile. He saw the red sunlight striking her flaming hair, as Gerald had seen it, and much the same thoughts occurred to him, but he could not express them.

"Good-bye," said Araby, still smiling.

"And to-morrow," said Pine, "to-morrow?"

"Oh, to-morrow," said Araby lightly, "to-morrow, who can tell? It may thaw. This frost can't last for ever. I am not sure that I even want it to last."

Herbert Pine tapped the snow with his boot.

"It won't thaw to-night," he said.

Araby shivered and drew her coat more closely across her chest. What a smart coat, he thought. It was plain as a man's. How slight and supple was the figure that was clothed so neatly.

"Now I must go," she said. She put out her hand once more.

"If it doesn't thaw," he said humbly, "and it will not——"

"But to-morrow I may not want to skate," she said. "I cannot tell. It may not be necessary."

"Necessary?"

But she did not explain.

CHAPTER XVI.

GERALD VENTNOR meanwhile continued to wonder many things. Something was puzzling him in these days, and troubling him too. He was not of a type that is impressionable. His amusements, which were many, had hitherto sufficed to make life of sufficient interest to him to be worth the living—not, be it said, by the way, that one is given much choice in the matter: one is born, and one is. The lot of Gerald, however, was not hard, and he invariably made and got the best of it.

By the generosity of his father he was not cramped for means. Sir John, who was one of the members for his county, and was interested in little that did not directly concern politics, was a rich man, and treated his family with the utmost liberality. He had wished that his son also should distinguish himself in Parliament, but when he found that Gerald's taste did not lie in that direction he did not press his point, nor did he vent upon him such disappointment as he may have felt.

That Gerald followed a profession of idleness was due then to prosperous circumstance. Still he

did not waste his life. He was indolent perhaps in London, and during a winter in which he was debarred from hunting at home by a prolonged frost, and the fact that the Combe Lecton stables were in an unsatisfactory condition. He was a keen rider, and he cared more for a good run than for anything else in the world. He was an average shot, and he did not fish. The country was full of delights for him. People who met him casually in town, and to whom a certain absence of enthusiasm seemed a characteristic that made perhaps part of his perverse charm, would have been surprised to know the effect produced upon him by the gorgeous tints of autumn woods, the silver mist of a spring morning, the dull red of a sunset. Those negative qualities of his manner had an attraction that might be hard to define but that was sufficiently potent. They were unassumed, but they belied him. He was often less indifferent than he appeared. That he made his friends involuntarily is true, and that in the matter of affection he got perhaps far more than he gave. This had happened even in his Eton days, when he had been the Steerforth of many a Copperfield. Still if he did not return in measure the love of his fellows he appreciated it, and it made him happy. With men he was always popular. Women were attracted by something which they did not understand, and after trying to fathom it they en-

deavored sometimes to persuade themselves that they did not like him.

Miss Norfolk had never attempted so to deceive herself. She had recognized in early days that he was out of her reach. Rightly or wrongly the impression was strong upon her that he had read her from the first, and that the smile in which she vaguely felt that he had summed her up was somehow an epigram. This piqued her in the beginning, though it did not prevent a certain friendship from existing between him and herself. She watched him, and presently she shrugged her shoulders and contented herself with smaller game.

Of his own family his sister perhaps knew him best.

"Nothing seems to touch Gerald," she said to Maud Athol, "but with Gerald you can't go by appearances. People get much nearer to him than they think. If I thought that he was really as indifferent as he sometimes looks, I should suffer for his friends and for myself. You know Archie Newport who was engaged to Miss Runton?—well, Gerald and he were at Oxford together and they were friends. Men's friendships are stronger than ours, Maud. Mr. Newport was in great trouble when Miss Runton threw him up, and I think he used to tell Gerald about it. One day I heard them talking. I was in the room, and they did not know that I was

there, and something, I forget what, prevented my telling them or getting away. Mr. Newport said something about wasted affection. He said something about its being always one-sided—the '*un qui aime, et un qui se laisse aimer*' theory, and a little bitterly he instanced his friendship with Gerald. Gerald just looked at him and put his hand on his shoulder."

Maud Athol's eyes were very bright. She and Gerald were themselves good friends, too good, she thought they had tacitly agreed, to risk matrimony. Still Miss Athol was one of the few girls with whom Gerald could have contemplated linking his fate, and when Bobby Newton came along from Texas, and an engagement was announced in Barn Street, Gerald, though he said nothing of the state of his feelings to Newport, who had confided in him, and though he gave his congratulations heartily, slept little that night, and Miss Ventnor, noting his silence in the morning, drew a further conclusion of her own.

Gerald was in no hurry to marry. Beyond the disappointment, such as it was, of having let Maud Athol slip, he devoted few thoughts at all to subjects connected with marriage. He rejoiced with Newport when Miss Runton recalled him. His friends and his sports filled his life. He met and became interested in Mrs. Ruthven. For her he moved back somewhat

the barriers which almost unconsciously he placed round himself. He talked to her frankly, or he was silent and listened to her. But he was never silent without listening, which was a complaint that other people often made against him.

Joan Vincent, Maud Athol's sister, said of him at Lady George's dance in Barn Street—"He sits on the stairs with one—you can hardly ever get him to dance—and one has to talk to him and I don't believe he hears a word you say." Mrs. Vincent had a trick of mixing her pronouns. Maud Athol's marriage with Bobby Newton was approaching, and she was very happy. She smiled at the knowledge that Gerald always talked to her. Joan Vincent wondered why she smiled.

On Maud Athol then, though she but vaguely guessed it, and he was hardly aware of it till it was too late, had Gerald's affections been disposed to rest. When the coming of Newton had shown him that she was not for him, he did not by any means give himself up to what used to be called repining, but he was a little more susceptible to the influence of women than before. His interest in Mrs. Ruthven may or may not have been traceable to this. He placed her upon no imaginary pedestal. He took her as she appeared, and appearance, as we know, was her strong point. It was lately that he had begun to wonder and to

speculate, and the root of his wonderings and his speculation was—Araby.

So long as he had supposed that she was the nonentity and the impossibility which her mother, without saying it in so many words, had somehow represented her, he thought little on the matter. Mrs. Ruthven did not talk much of her daughter. A less clever woman would have talked more. She worked subtly.

So in the beginning, and in point of actual time that was a very few months back, Gerald had passed over Araby. He thought now that his eyes had been holden. Her beauty had been a revelation to him. He had always admired her as one may admire that which one has not studied; but a full realization of her charm had been withheld from him till that moment when, almost involuntarily, he had given voice to the thoughts which possessed him, as he saw her standing in the red sunset light of which her flaming hair seemed itself a part. He saw her many times thus in the days that followed. Another impression of her that was often present with him was that of her face as he had seen it on the day when he had met her on the white landing outside the drawing-room door in Primate Street, and another that of her supple and slender form sitting at the piano, as she sang. He remembered the line of her throat, of her head as the face was raised in singing.

He heard of the going of Araby with far more disappointment than was at all apparent, and Mrs. Ruthven did more wisely even than she herself knew in not choosing that moment for telling him of her misstatement to her daughter. He would not have pardoned it just then.

He was silent in the carriage going home. Miss Ventnor talked all the way.

"The Norfolk girl will secure the Hartford boy with patience," she said, amongst other things.

Gerald's mouth relaxed to a smile.

He said laconically that whenever that happened Miss Norfolk might take the rest which she had so conscientiously earned. Then he lapsed once more into silence, and Lennox Gardens was reached.

A fire was burning brightly in the smoking-room. Gerald threw himself into an easy-chair beside it and lit a cigar. He stretched out his arm for the square bottle that stood on a table at hand. Then he proceeded leisurely to open a bottle of soda-water. Miss Ventnor, with apprehensive eyebrows, stood by the hearth till he had successfully accomplished this, and then she pulled a stool on to the rug and sat at his feet with her head against his knee.

"Gerald."

"Yes, dear."

"Why didn't Mrs. Ruthven bring her daughter to-night?"

"Probably because mother hasn't been too civil."

"Mother shall call to-morrow or the day after," said Miss Ventnor. "But I didn't mean to dinner."

There was silence, and she held her glass up, and looked at the fire through the pale amber liquid.

"I meant to the ball—that was different. And she went herself. Was it really because Miss Ruthven is barely out?"

"I don't know, Gwen."

There was another silence. Ventnor watched the blue smoke that rose from his cigar, and his sister looked into the fire.

"What a nice girl she is!" she said presently, and without removing her eyes from the glowing coals. "What a sweet face! I never knew how beautiful that flaming hair could be till I saw her. And, Gerald, her eyes! They are a sort of golden color, like the eyes of that yellow collie Mr. Newport had. I think her lovely. Gerald, I took the most enormous fancy to her. What are you smiling at?"

Gerald was thinking of all the other girls whom his sister had thought lovely, but he did not explain.

Miss Ventnor continued to be enthusiastic about Araby for some minutes, at the end of which she emptied her glass, and made a little grimace.

"I think whiskey is horrid. Good-night."

She put her face down to his to be kissed.

"Gerald!"

She turned back from the door and advanced into the middle of the room.

"Well?"

"Do you think Mrs. Ruthven is—is fond of her daughter?"

Gerald did not answer, and Miss Ventnor lingered undecidedly. She looked at her brother and read nothing from his face. She made as if she would have added something further, and then she appeared to change her mind, and said "Good-night" abruptly.

"Good-night," said Gerald. He smiled absently when the door had closed behind her.

CHAPTER XVII.

He sat on for a long time thinking.

Presently he found that his cigar had gone out, and he lit another. There was a deliberation in his vigil, for he threw a log upon the fire, and drew his chair nearer to the fender. What a cold night it was! There were poor devils wandering about London now without a roof to cover them. He shuddered, and determined to double his subscriptions to such philanthropic societies as cared for the physical wants of the destitute. It was a night for charitable inclinations and intentions.

Then came fugitive thoughts of the George Athols; of Mrs. Ruthven's emerald ring which had attracted his attention when she drew off her glove at supper; of the Norfolk girl on what her sister called the Hartford chase; of Gwen; and then his thoughts steadied themselves to a definite line and marked Araby. He felt somehow that he had been cheated out of the pleasure he had been anticipating in the evening that was over. And he fancied that Araby had been cheated too. He had been present at the invitation. He remembered how Araby's

"How is Mrs. Ruthven?" he asked, presently.

eyes had glowed with prospective enjoyment, and he wondered what had happened between then and later to have caused what was obviously sudden, and a change of plans. Mrs. Ruthven's manner at supper had somehow puzzled him. He wondered how his hurried visit to St. James's Hall had come to her knowledge. He remembered then something that Araby had said to him as he put her into the cab. She had asked him whether her mother knew of his coming, and when he had said that it was not so, she had begged him to return to the theatre with all possible speed. She had even, he thought, shown some apprehension as to the consequences of his act. This at least was his impression.

He thought over these things, till the conviction was strong within him that in some way Araby's going was connected with the trifling incident of that evening.

The immediate result of thinking over the situation was, that Gerald in the course of the next day or two found himself so restless and perplexed that he determined to leave town. There were plenty of country houses open to him. He had been refusing invitations lately, because just then London seemed as good a place to be in as any other. His sister thought him uncommunicative. Lady Ventnor, with the air of a martyr, had duly called upon Mrs. Ruthven, and when Gwen told him of the visit, he seemed to her indifferent.

"You would have laughed if you could have seen mamma," said Miss Ventnor, chuckling a little over her recollections. "She grumbled all the way, and abused everybody—Mrs. Sandon and you and me, and Audrey for letting her house—and then when she met Mrs. Ruthven she gushed—positively gushed. You know mamma's *empresse* manner. And I am sure Mrs. Ruthven must have thought her charming."

Gerald said that he was glad that his mother had been civil.

"But it wasn't from motives of civility," said Miss Ventnor, still chuckling. "It was pure insincerity. Mamma is inherently insincere."

Gerald smiled absently, and his sister, who did not altogether dislike the sound of Miss Ventnor's voice, began to speculate idly as to when this inherited trait would break out in herself. She arrived at no very definite conclusions. Gerald did not appear to regard the subject as one of any importance, to judge by his preoccupied look, and Miss Ventnor subsided into silence.

He went round to Primate Street on the day before his departure.

"And for how long?" said Mrs. Ruthven, when he had informed her that he was leaving London. She looked at him intently for a few moments, and noted many trivial things.

He enumerated a few of the houses he was going to visit.

"Then you will be away a month."

"Quite that—perhaps two."

"This is a change of plan, isn't it?"

"I generally make up my mind suddenly. I like to be free."

She looked at him again.

"What is it about you? You are not like yourself to-day. You are different——"

It struck her that "indifferent" would have expressed her meaning just as well.

Gerald did not refute the charge with any alacrity. He was not of the type of man who hastens to fill a silence. Pauses did not embarrass him.

"How is Miss Ruthven?" he asked, presently. There was nothing in the tone in which he spoke to have told that the subject was one of any particular interest to him.

"Araby!—oh, Araby is very well."

So the talk languished. Mrs. Ruthven, with alarm, realized that something of her hold over Gerald was gone. Gerald was not less conscious of this, and the situation was strained.

He rose at length to go.

"Good-bye," said Mrs. Ruthven. "Good-bye. I hope you will have a good time. When you have nothing better to do, you might write me a line to say how the world goes with you."

When the drawing-room door closed behind him, she went and stood by the fire. The flames leapt cheerily, and were reflected in the hot tiles. But to the woman who leant against the mantelpiece, and whose face wore a smile that was more grim than a frown and more sad than tears, the hearth and her own heart and life seemed full of ashes.

Gerald met Olympe on the stairs. She held some pieces of glass and a broken frame. Gerald nodded to her.

"An accident, Mlle. Olympe?"

"An accident, for example, monsieur. *Je crois bien.* I take up Miss Araby to clean the frame, and my 'ans are so cold, I let fall."

Gerald saw that the broken frame held a photograph of Araby.

"The glass—that is nothing. I get another for a few sous. But the silver is bent and a—what you call, a screw—a rivet—is missing. Well, no matter. It can't be 'elped. I take it to the shop."

"Let me see," said Gerald, but he looked at the picture, not the frame.

It seemed to him that he had found Araby once more. It was his fancy that the eyes were reproachful.

"Shall I get it mended for you, Mlle. Olympe?"

"Oh, monsieur!"

"I know a man in Sloane Street who would do

it," said Gerald. "It is a small thing. He will make it as good as new. The silver can easily be straightened."

"You are too good, monsieur. It is too much to trouble you——"

"It is no trouble," said Gerald. "I pass the shop on my way home."

"Thank you, monsieur, a thousand times. Let me——"

"What are you going to do?"

"I remove the photograph. I make you less to carry."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," said Gerald.

"*Bien,* monsieur."

Her twinkling eyes met his, and became suddenly grave.

"Miss Araby was sorry to go," she said, abruptly. The butler came up to whistle for a hansom, and Olympe with large hips and light tread tripped upstairs.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GERALD VENTNOR spent a fortnight in Leicestershire, a week in Hampshire, a few days in Essex, and heard nothing of the Ruthvens. He kept Araby's photograph till the frame was mended, and by that time he knew that he was in love with her, and that he meant it.

It was grudgingly even then that he parted with the picture. It seemed to him that in studying it he was getting to know the girl herself better. He discovered fresh beauties in it every day. He looked at it till he almost fancied he had called up an answer into the eyes, as devout Catholics have adored images of the Virgin till in an ecstacy of devotion they have imagined miraculous signs from the inanimate wood or stone. Gerald in love was a new Gerald, but with something of the same Gerald still. It was enough for him that he knew that he loved Araby, He was able to feed upon his own love for her, and he was beset by no fever of impatince to declare himself. He preferred indeed to have a time in which to think of her and of the future. For this he had no fears. What was there indeed to fear? Lady

Ventnor, of course, since she distrusted all girls, and suffered acutely by reason of her fear that her son would be entrapped by the designing, would raise her voice in woe; but it was a voice to which little heed was paid, either in Lennox Gardens or at Combe Lecton; and Sir John, master of his own house, was in favor of early marriages. There was no reason to dread obstacles.

Gerald did not care to think of Mrs. Ruthven just then. But he had to think of her whether he would or no. It seemed to him that with his sudden attraction to Araby—with, as he expressed it to himself, the opening of his eyes, which up to then had been blind—there had come almost a revulsion of feeling against her mother. When he looked back over the last few months, it appeared to him that there had always been grave limitations to such admiration, call it what you like, as he had had for her. Possibly the knowledge that he was one of many was not outbalanced by the later knowledge that he was the one of all. Perhaps this later knowledge did not—since the affections know no coercion—draw him nearer to her. Be this as it may, the more he thought of Araby the further he receded from Mrs. Ruthven. Much that had impressed him little at the time of its occurrence took now a sinister meaning. He could not bear to think that Araby had been subjected to unkindness or neglect. He did

not in point of fact believe that either had been palpable. He accused Mrs. Ruthven of nothing that was active. He had never been present at the baiting of Araby. His charge against her mother was rather that of a deliberate withholding of her sympathy, and of making Araby of no account. He had read the girl's character sufficiently well to know that she was sensitive. He felt that she was being repressed, and driven back upon herself.

Gerald began to build castles in the air. He had gathered generally from remarks that Mrs. Ruthven had made concerning the Miss Woottons, that Araby's upbringing had been narrow in its tendency. Araby was still so young that Gerald told himself that the delight of directing her into broader paths would be his. Under his tender care of her, he would see her develop and expand, as some beautiful flower expands when the plant that bears it is taken from an ungenerous spot, where it has been hemmed in and denied air and light, and removed to a richer soil and a freer and clearer atmosphere.

He would take Araby abroad. They should travel together, seeing all that was beautiful in art and nature. Araby had never been out of England, and he imagined something of the freshness of the happiness that would be hers, and vicariously his, as she received new impressions. There would be an unconscious education for them both. She would

learn the world, and get wisdom by experience; he would teach her. The pleasure of such a schooling as this was a thing on which to dream. . . .

Time passed meanwhile. Had Araby been in Primate Street, Gerald would have returned to town; but he knew her to be still staying with the Miss Woottons, and he prolonged his visits. He had expected a line from Olympe to acknowledge the mended frame, and he awaited it with some small impatience. He accounted for her silence when he heard from his sister casually, and amongst the other items of news with which she filled her letters, that Mrs. Ruthven had left town.

He had, however, almost ceased to expect it, when there reached him one day a note written in the flowing and flourishing hand of the Frenchwoman. It bore the Eccram post-mark, and had been forwarded to him from Lennox Gardens. Olympe expressed unlimited gratitude for the service which Monsieur had done for her, and much regret that, owing to a delay in sending the frame after her from Primate Street, she had not known sooner of its arrival, and so been able to thank Monsieur at once. The goodness of Monsieur the writer would never forget, and if at any time she could be of use to Monsieur in any way, Monsieur had but to command her.

Gerald read nothing between the lines. But a

sentence in a postscript surprised him, and disturbed him somewhat as well——

"I am sure that Miss Araby would wish to express obligation to Monsieur for his kindness. I must make thanks for Mademoiselle by proxy. Miss Araby is out for a walk with Mr. Hartford at the moment."

Gerald looked up from the letter.

"What does the woman mean?" he said to himself, when he had read the words twice. "What does Olympe mean? She had some reason for adding that. And Hartford—what the devil is he doing at Eccram?"

He could find no satisfactory answers to the questions he asked. In his perplexity he bethought him of Mrs. Sandon, of whom he knew Hartford to be a favorite; so, diplomatically hoping that she would be diffusive in reply, he asked if she could furnish him with his friend's address.

He smiled to himself as he directed and stamped the envelope.

Mrs. Sandon answered his letter by return of post. She was as diffusive as any one could have wished, but in another direction. Her neighbor, Lady Murgatroyd, had succumbed after only a few days' illness to an attack of bronchitis, and had left all she possessed to the scamp Sloane Wetherley.

Mrs. Sandon was bubbling over with so much ex-

citement, and with such indignation tempered at intervals by remorse and charity, that she wrote four pages, almost innocent of punctuation except so far as the feminine dash may count for it, and only at the end remembered to answer Gerald's question.

"My intimate friend and neighbor," she wrote, "and after only being ill the inside of a week I heard she had this horrid bronchitis on Monday. She has always been subject to it in the winter and she will not take care of herself I sent over at once to enquire and by Sunday night she was dead. Isn't it dreadful—I could scarcely believe it when it was told to me I have seen her almost every day for the last ten years and I can hardly realize yet that I shall never see her again. And to think that she should have left everything to that rogue who treated her so badly It makes me wild I never could understand what she saw in him but he could always twist her round his little finger. She was a good woman and one doesn't like to say anything now that she is dead—I was very fond of her though one might have wished that she had had a little more sense I was going to say but I don't like to use the word in this connection. Still one can't help regretting the failings of one's friends I shall miss her dreadfully she used to come in at odd times and I was always glad to see her—Nothing saddens one so much as one gets older as the drop-

ping off one by one of one's old friends Poor dear Lady Murgatroyd she hated the word so much that I don't think she would have liked to be called 'old' even as a friend I hear she looked a thousand in her coffin."

Gerald involuntarily smiled, and thought that Lady Murgatroyd would have risen from her grave could she have read this.

"I feel very sad and lonely," the letter ran as it approached an end. "I suppose it will be my turn next Care of Miss Wootton Eccram Northshire will find Mr. Hartford Mrs. Ruthven went down there herself a few days ago and took him with her She is always unaccountable Come and see me when you come back to town and cheer me up for I feel very low.

"Yours affly,

"EMMA SANDON.

"P. S. I should scarcely think that scamp would dare to show his face in London just yet but it would be just like him if he brazened it out Sloane Wetherley I mean."

Gerald folded up the letter.

"One less unhappy woman in the world," he said to himself with a sigh. "Poor Lady Murgatroyd! And after all why shouldn't she do as she liked with her own?"

But he went back at once to his thought of Araby, and in this his attitude may be taken as symbolical of that of others of the acquaintances of the restless woman who had laid down her arms in the fight. A few words expressive of shock at the suddenness of her defeat, a few words of regret, a whisper of scandal, an eyebrow raised, a head shaken, and those amongst whom Lady Murgatroyd had passed her unsatisfied life talked of other things. So Lady Murgatroyd died and was forgotten.

Gerald could scarcely have said why the presence of Hartford at Eccram disquieted him. Mrs. Ruthven's departure too from town was sudden as that of Araby, and a presentiment that all was not well—and the normal Gerald, the Gerald out of love, did not believe in presentiments nor attach any importance to them,—now took possession of him.

In this mood he wrote to Mrs. Ruthven. He had expected from what he knew of women that she would have written to him first; and the fact that he had not heard from her added itself to the sum of the other things which were vaguely disturbing him.

Happily at length the frost broke up, and a few days with the hounds seemed to bring him back somewhat to himself. When a week had passed, and there seemed no likelihood of a return of the severe weather, he began to think of going home to

Combe Lecton for the end of the hunting. The stables were finished, and he heard from his father of a run that made him wish to be in his own county. He determined as soon as he had got through his engagements to lose as little of the season as remained.

In the meantime he heard from Mrs. Ruthven. She wrote him a long letter, and told him nothing that he wished to know, which is tantamount to saying that Araby was scarcely mentioned, and Hartford most casually.

Gerald felt that he could do nothing, and he resigned himself to the inevitable and waited. He would have written to Araby herself had it not seemed to him that in point of fact his acquaintance with her had never reached that closeness with which in thought only he associated it. He must not forget, he told himself, that he had fallen in love with her two days at the most before she was parted from him. When he sought the exact moment, he placed it at that which had brought him face to face with her on the white landing outside the drawing-room door in Primate Street. The impression she made upon him then had been deepened when she sung in the firelight of the later afternoon. Then at dinner he had ignored her. That was horrible, and a thing to forget. He had made up for that perhaps by the hurried meeting with her at the

St. James's Hall. After that came the day on the ice, and the sudden and fuller realizing of her beauty; and after that nothing actually—virtually everything. Gerald had, as it were, fallen in love on last sight, and worked backwards. He got to know her in retrospect.

Obviously he could not write.

CHAPTER XX.

FEBRUARY was half gone, and six weeks had passed since Gerald left town when he started for the place the visit to which he determined should be his last before going home to Combe Lecton. He knew that he should meet a big party, for his hostess was filling her house for a couple of balls in the neighborhood, but he did not expect to see any one that would interest him, much less did he expect to hear news of the Ruthvens.

He arrived late in the afternoon, and hurried to his room to dress. On the stairs as he came thence he met Miss Norfolk.

He was frankly glad to see her, and he said so when they had exchanged greetings. He had met her so often in Primate Street that she derived thence in his eyes the reflected glory of Araby.

"I rather think," she said, as they crossed the big hall, "I rather think you have got to take me in to dinner."

"Well," said Gerald with amusement, "I don't mind."

"That's right," said Miss Norfolk, "for I have a lot to talk to you about."

They reached the drawing-room.

Gerald's hostess came forward and welcomed him with effusion. She said all the usual things. She has little bearing upon the story, and she may be briefly dismissed as a rich woman who had married three men and buried them, and who now "ran" their daughters.

Gerald found several acquaintances in the room, and by the time he had shaken hands with them dinner was announced.

Miss Norfolk walked beside him to the dining-room in silence. There was something in her manner that led him to expect the unexpected. She did not chatter, and he thought that there was more in her face than he had supposed. But he never took Miss Norfolk seriously.

"What had you to tell me?" he said.

He was reminded as he spoke the words that he had used them to Mrs. Ruthven a few weeks back, and he thought of Araby and sighed. A babel of tongues filled the room. Arrivals of the day were taking their bearings.

"You do as you like," Gerald heard a girl telling a man who had come by the same train as himself; "you will see all sorts of notices in your room about the hours of meals, and not keeping the carriages waiting, but you don't take any notice of them. It isn't a bad house to stay in, but the girls watch you.

There are five of them, mostly step-sisters. You will be expected to dance with all of them."

"Are there five?" said Gerald to Miss Norfolk.

Miss Norfolk nodded.

"Every second or third girl round the table is a daughter of the house," she said. "There were six. One married. Look at your hostess, Mr. Ventnor; wouldn't you like her for your wife's mother?"

Gerald looked up the table at the high-nosed lady at the head of it, and said——

"God forbid!"

Then he wondered how he should like Mrs. Ruthven in the same capacity. All thought at this period of his life seemed to lead back to Araby.

There was a pause. He had diverted Miss Norfolk for the moment from her purpose. Again he caught from the general chorus of voices detached snatches of conversation. The man who had traveled with him had settled down into a steady flirtation with the girl he had taken in to dinner. They were discussing the color of her eyes.

"They are *not* hazel," said Miss Norfolk in an aside to Gerald, "they are drab."

"What had you to say to me?" said Gerald again.

Miss Norfolk looked at him for a moment or two before she answered him. Then she began to laugh.

"I must tell some one," she said, "and I am

moved to tell you. I have done a generous action and—I have lost the reward."

Gerald, raising his eyebrows, said that Miss Norfolk could not mean that.

"Which?" asked she, "the action or the reward *manqué?* I mean both unhappily. You see I thought I was certain of the reward when I performed the action, but I was what you call a little bit previous."

"Annoying!" said Gerald.

"Pray," said Miss Norfolk, "treat the matter with becoming seriousness. I am in desperate earnest. What I am going to tell you is the disappointment and temporary failure of a life—I use the word temporary advisedly, for I don't intend to fail in the end."

"And your aims and object?" said Gerald.

"A girl with five sisters—my mother's quiver, you see, is as full as that of your hostess, but I do claim for us that we are better-looking!—a girl, I say, in such a case owes a duty to society. I see my duty clearly. It is my aim and my object to perform my duty to my family; but I am not going to propose to you, Mr. Ventnor."

"And the generous action?" asked Gerald.

Miss Norfolk thought for a few moments. Gerald looked round the table. In the pause the lady upon his left made some remark to him. Miss Norfolk waited for his attention.

"The generous action?" he said, turning to her as soon as he could, politely, disengage himself.

"Here," said Miss Norfolk, "comes the serious part of my story—the part, don't you know, which should be spoken with slow music. You wouldn't think I had much sentiment, would you? I don't know that I thought so myself till I met—Someone. Oh, my Someone! He—you mayn't believe it—had the odd taste to fall in love with me. He fell in love with me badly, and I . . . well, I suppose I have some feeling after all."

There was a tone in Miss Norfolk's voice that was unusual. Gerald's eyes met hers, which did not falter, and she proceeded after a little pause——

"As much then as it is in me to love any one, I love this man who loves me. Isn't it hideous in this world that one must consider ways and means? He is a barrister. He was poor a month ago. To-day, by a series of accidents, he is not. He had a rich uncle who was kind to him, but from whom he had no expectations, for the uncle married a young wife, and had an heir. Three weeks ago the young wife ran away with a lover. (Women, I am told, sometimes have lovers. It is odd, isn't it?) But that isn't all. The child was told some story by its nurse, which led it to suppose that it would find its mother at some place where it—the child, you know, they have no gender at a certain age—had

often stayed with her, and it went off there by itself, and was run over and killed, and so my barrister is his uncle's heir. All of which sounds like a fairy story, but is true."

"I am still in the dark," said Gerald. "I see that the rich barrister may be the reward——"

"He isn't the reward," said Miss Norfolk; "not the reward I had expected, any way, though he would have done ten thousand times as well. Besides, you haven't heard the generous action yet. I had given him away."

"Given him away?"

"Before I knew his worth, it is true. Still it did involve a sacrifice. I have a sister, one Anne, an unworldly girl, whom I am very fond of. She is very different from all of us. I found out that she was—well, one word does as well as another—head over ears in love with my barrister. She doesn't care for any of the things which are essential to my happiness—money, fun—oh, you know—and I gave her my barrister."

"How?"

"Well, he asked me to marry him. He asked me whether I cared for him. I said no. I said I didn't. I told him a lie. I did care for him. I do care for him, but I thought I saw my reward safe if I gave him to Anne. I talk glibly of giving him, don't I? Well, I have some grounds for it. Anne would

never have got him without me. He was always fond of her, and you know a man will often go, at a rebound, from the woman who has refused him to the nearest woman he likes. I gave him to Anne in that way. She is at this moment the happiest girl in England. I am paying visits to keep out of their way for a bit. His good fortune came after the engagement. I think he is happy with Anne, but I could get him back by beckoning with my little finger if I chose, and I won't. He will forgive me in time, and love Anne as she deserves."

"It seems to me," said Gerald, "that it is more generous of you not to try and get him back than to have given him away in the first instance. I still want to know of the reward you expected."

Miss Norfolk was silent again. Gerald was wondering how far the girl who was talking to him was doing herself justice. He felt attracted to her, and he fancied somehow that deeper feelings than she acknowledged underlay what she had told him.

"I have a reason for telling you," she said presently, "beyond the wish to tell somebody. After certain words that passed between Mr. Hartford and myself at the George Athols', I thought I had only to wait a day or two to announce myself engaged to him. Yes, it is funny, isn't it? I couldn't fall in love with him, but he would give me all that I want, and we could both be very happy. He very

nearly—how shall I put it?—accepted me at supper that night. I gave my barrister to Anne to leave myself free to marry Mr. Hartford and his very good fortunes. By doing this I unconsciously gave up what would have been a very good investment. Mrs. Ruthven, directly you left town, whisked off Mr. Hartford to what's the name of the place?—Eccram, and——"

Something in Gerald's expression arrested her attention.

"But you must know this!"

"And what? Go on."

"Well, I don't know how she has managed it, but Mr. Hartford is engaged to Araby Ruthven."

"Good God!" said Gerald, in spite of himself.

CHAPTER XX.

Miss Norfolk looked at him quickly. But she had no suspicion that his feelings towards Araby were other than those of the good-natured indifference with which she had always associated his attitude to girls.

She had told him the story because, as she had said, she wished to tell some one. She was suffering at this time far more keenly than her bare words admitted. She could talk to Gerald as she could talk to no one else. It was he in the first instance who had suggested to her the capture of Hartford. He had once even jokingly said to her that Hartford and she, since they would demand little of each other but affectionate toleration, were eminently qualified for the relative positions of husband and wife. Something in the irony of her apparent loss of him seemed too humorous a thing to keep to herself. The acknowledgment that she had a heart came, however, necessarily into the story she was telling, and was an explanation perhaps of much that was obscure in a character that appeared to be frankly ingenuous.

There was another pause. The servants placed the wine upon the table and withdrew.

Miss Norfolk, in many words, had made her confession. Gerald, with a sudden misgiving, thought that he had made his in two. But he was wrong, for as yet he had disclosed nothing. The fact that he thought he had betrayed himself kept him for a few moments from giving voice to the questions that burned to be asked. By the time that he had realized that it was unlikely that Miss Norfolk could have guessed a secret that was known only to himself, the hostess, who ran five girls, caught the eye of her duchess, and the ladies left the room.

Gerald found himself talking, and of what or to whom he could not off-hand have answered. But he always remembered afterwards the pattern of the table-cloth.

The short service system was the ruin of the army (there were roses and thistles and shamrocks in shining damask), and regiments that had been the pride of England and the envy of her enemies were now made up of a lot of boys (roses and thistles and shamrocks with curling ribbons . . .). Here came a long gap. Gerald looked at the man who was speaking, but he grasped nothing of his meaning. "By Jove," they said, "these aren't the fellows that conquered India." There was another gap. Gerald had returned to his contemplation of

the cloth. A bit of ash dropped on to it from his cigarette. He brushed the gray dust with his finger into a minute heap, and then fitted it to the shape of one of the woven shamrock leaves. He heard something about a war, about Russia, Napoleon, the German Emperor. He even expressed opinions, but all the time he could not have said what he was discussing. He only knew that Araby was lost to him, and that there were roses and thistles and shamrocks in the design of the cloth.

He went with the rest to the ball, for which he was ostensibly a guest in the house, but he danced little, and was so generally unresponsive that he incurred the displeasure of the woman who had buried three men. Possibly it was the fact that each of the three had left her with a contribution of daughters on her hands that made her so severe.

"He hasn't asked one of my girls to dance," she said to her duchess. "He did, I believe, put down Evelyn's name on his shirt-cuff, but then he never turned up. What does he think I asked him here for?"

"You must allow he is very ornamental, said her Grace.

"Oh, ornamental!" said the mother of girls. "If I could only say what I think of them, to some of these modern young men, I'd make them dance."

Her Grace thought of the three men who the good

woman herself had danced into marriage and the tomb, and said *Je crois bien* in English.

Gerald meanwhile was awaiting with what patience he could command an opportunity of continuing his interrupted conversation with Miss Norfolk. Despite his manœvuring to get into the same omnibus with her for the eight-mile drive, he had been frustrated by his hostess, who shut him and two or three other men of the class known to mothers of girls as eligible, into a conveyance with no less than three of her own daughters.

At length the opportunity he was waiting for occurred. Miss Norfolk had arranged her dances up to a certain point, and then had left a gap for Gerald.

"When did you hear it?" he asked, without preamble. He was absorbed by one subject at that moment, and it did not occur to him to lead up to it—nor indeed if it had occurred to him would it have seemed necessary. After the confessions of Miss Norfolk at dinner, he did not greatly care whether he allowed his interest in Araby to be guessed or not. Miss Norfolk, if this was her object, had so far succeeded in attaining it that, by her burst of confidence, she had established between them a far closer friendship than had ever before existed.

"I heard it last week. I knew that Mr. Hartford

had gone up to Eccram with Mrs. Ruthven, because mamma heard it from Mrs. Sandon. Well, I was at school with a girl called Cora Pine, whose father is Vicar of Eccram. I naturally wanted to know what Mr. Hartford had been asked up there for, so I revived a correspondence which had flourished once between Miss Pine and myself, and which with years had languished and died. There once existed between us that sort of feminine friendship, don't you know, that evinces itself in notes beginning 'Dearest.' I believe we even promised to tell each other everything. I can safely say that Cora Pine knows about as little of me as any girl I know. But this is all beside the subject. I wrote to Cora Pine and reminded her of old times, and then I touched quite casually upon the fact that friends of mine were, I believed, neighbors of hers."

"And then——?"

"Well, then—what a lovely waltz!—doesn't the band play well? You must give me a dance presently——Well, then, I got a letter from her. Six pages. Three on end about our old friendship, and another about her brother Herbert, who has grown up, and whom she is evidently very proud of. I remember him as an insufferably shy and lanky boy. The other two pages were devoted to the party at the Hall, and they followed, I found, very naturally upon the one which she devoted to her brother.

(Her pages, you must understand, are good honest conscientious pages of thirty or forty lines—such pages you know as are not written now, when people write enormous hands, and fill a line with a word, and write about four to the side of a sheet.) It seems that the lanky brother who has grown so handsome—a thing I do not and will not believe!—has conceived a romantic attachment for Miss Ruthven. Are you listening?"

Gerald changed his position. The light from a lamp fell thus on the back of his head, and his face was in shadow. The dance had come to an end, and people began to pass along the corridor at one end of which Miss Norfolk and he were sitting. A girl stopped near, hanging back from her partner to tear a strip of stuff from the bottom of her dress. Miss Norfolk was somehow reminded of the work-room in Sloane Street, of Anne, of Dennis Leigh, and she caught her lower lip tightly between her teeth.

"Yes, I am listening," said Gerald, presently, seeing that she was silent. "Please go on."

But Miss Norfolk had lost herself in reverie.

"Where had I got to? I beg your pardon."

"You said that Mr. Pine—was it?—had conceived an attachment for Miss Ruthven."

"They were great friends always, Cora tells me, and when he saw her this time—Cora is romantic and sings songs such as 'Oh no, we never mention

her'—she knew that he had met his fate. She said that to herself when she saw them skating together——"

"They skated together . . ." said Gerald.

"Yes. Then down pounced Mrs. Ruthven with Mr. Hartford, and in a fortnight he and Miss Ruthven were engaged, and Cora says—— Oh, they have begun to play again, and you must dance this with me."

"In a minute then," said Gerald. "What does Miss Pine say?"

"I don't want to miss any of it," said Miss Norfolk, rising to her feet. "Come along, Mr. Ventnor, I'll tell you as we dance."

He allowed himself to be persuaded, and joined the stream that flowed into the ball-room. There Miss Norfolk made him dance. She was light herself and supple, and presently Gerald was dancing for his own pleasure. His hostess saw him, and also that two of her own girls were standing by the door, and she made her comments freely.

"She sat out the last dance with him," said Evelyn, whose name was on his shirt-cuff against a number which he had never claimed.

"And *she* asked *him* to dance this," said her stepsister. "I heard her."

"When he asks me for another," said Evelyn significantly, "I shall refuse it."

"But he won't ask you," said the step-sister.

Miss Norfolk and he swung round the room together.

"That was worth it?" asked Miss Norfolk as the last bars sounded, and she opened her fan. Gerald assented, and led her back to the end of the corridor, where they had been sitting before. They found their seats occupied by Evelyn and the step-sister, who had, as the step-sister expressed it, made up a party to defeat the enemy.

To this end Evelyn had had to swallow such indignation as had been called up by the recent example of "feline amenities" given by the daughter of her mother and her mother's last husband but one.

"Oh," she said sweetly to Miss Norfolk, and giving an example of her own, "oh, I am afraid we have got your places, but we didn't think you would be coming back."

Miss Norfolk on her part would have liked to give as her reason for begging them not to move, that they must be tired with standing.

But she only nodded and smiled, and passed on with Gerald to other seats.

"And Miss Pine says—?" said Gerald, continuing the conversation where it had left off, and as if there had been no interval to break it.

"Says," said Miss Norfolk, "that she believes that Mrs. Ruthven—may I use Cora's own words?"

Gerald nodded.

"Well, has bullied her daughter into it."

There was silence. Gerald said something under his breath. Miss Norfolk saw that the girls had left the seats at the end of the passage.

"Anything more?" said Gerald at last.

"Yes, a little. But why does all this interest you?"

"The Ruthvens are friends of mine."

"And perhaps for that reason I ought not to have told you."

Gerald shrugged his shoulders.

"Why does Miss Pine think that force was brought to bear upon Miss Ruthven?"

"Because Miss Ruthven does not seem happy."

Gerald made some sound. It was scarcely an exclamation. Miss Norfolk looked at him again. An expression of question and wonder was upon her own face. It was slowly forming itself to one of surprised conviction.

"Cora Pine thinks Miss Ruthven is fretting for some one else. Girls do fret sometimes. She thought at first that she had had some disappointment. She says that she thought that when Miss Ruthven arrived, but now she thinks that it is her brother that she cares for. But I think——"

"What?"

"That Cora Pine has let her own bias blunt her

judgment, and that in trying to account for Miss Ruthven's unhappiness, if it exists, she has sought a cause at hand, and chosen romantically a reason that she would wish to be the real one. She is inordinately fond of this brother."

"And you don't think it likely that Miss Ruthven cares for him?"

"I certainly should not take it on the authority of Cora Pine. You see she gives herself away when she says that she thinks Miss Ruthven arrived at Eccram unhappy."

Gerald leant his head on his hand, and Miss Norfolk looked at him—steadily, now that he did not see her, but she had only a partial view of his face. His attitude however seemed to her eloquent. She remembered afterwards that the pink of his hunt-coat was reflected in a rosy glow upon his cheek, and that his feet—his legs were crossed, and the elbow of the arm that supported his head rested upon his knee—were long and slender.

"If one could only know the truth," he said. He was talking as much to himself as to her.

"I could easily find it out," said Miss Norfolk.

He raised his head.

"How?"

"By going to Eccram."

"Eccram?"

"To the Vicarage, I mean, not the Hall. Cora Pine asks me."

"Shall you go?"

"I don't know. I am asked to fix my own time."

"Miss Norfolk."

"Yes, Mr. Ventnor."

"I am going to ask you to do something for me, and I am going to tell you what I haven't told to a living soul."

Miss Norfolk trembled a little, and was silent and waited.

"Will you go to Eccram? Will you find out what is going on there? You have been frank enough with me to-night, and I will be equally frank. I—laugh at me if you like—I love Araby Ruthven. Oh, I am hard hit, I tell you, when I can talk of it like this. But I can't lose her. My God, I can't, and you can help me. Can't you? Won't you? If she is engaged to Hartford of her own free will, well and good. I am human, and I shan't die, and in time I dare say I shall get over it; but if she isn't, by God, she shan't be made to marry him. Not that he isn't a good chap enough, but she shan't be forced into anything."

"When did it happen?" said Miss Norfolk, as soon as she could get in a word. "It never occurred to me that you went to Primate Street—forgive me—to see Miss Ruthven."

Gerald smiled.

"I didn't," he said, "I didn't. You are perfectly

right. How can I say when it happened? The minute she was gone, I think. I believe I scarcely thought of her till then, and since then I have thought of nothing else. It was so sudden, and yet so gradual too, for all the time the beauty of her character must have been making its impression upon me."

"You never appeared to notice her."

"My eyes were held, I think, so that I should not see."

Miss Norfolk said nothing for a few seconds.

"I am staying here till Wednesday," she said then, "and this is what?—Friday. I might take Eccram on my way home. I will write to Cora Pine to-morrow morning."

"It is good of you."

Gerald's hand held hers for a moment. There was a suggestion of tears in the brightness of Miss Norfolk's eyes. But she only said in her every-day voice——

"You see Mr. Hartford is at stake as well as Miss Ruthven."

CHAPTER XXI.

Miss Norfolk had in no way misrepresented the facts of the case to Gerald in telling him that she had given Dennis Leigh to Anne. It was indeed a case of rebound, but only the decisiveness of Miss Norfolk's answer had given the impetus which sent him, as she expressed it, from the woman who had refused him to the nearest woman he liked. Miss Norfolk, despite her calculating way of talking and her almost brutal frankness in dissecting her own motives; despite her cold-blooded discussion of marriage as a means; despite, in fact, the Miss Norfolk which she chose to show to the world, was full of generous impulses, and her feelings were far deeper than she had admitted even to Gerald. She had spoken of Dennis Leigh lightly enough, for although she had declared herself fond of him, she had done it in such a way as to convey a very inadequate impression of the value of her affections.

She was guided, however, more by her head than her heart, and she preferred rather to suffer for the wisdom that told her that she could not endure poverty even with love, than to accept present happi-

ness at the cost of future and lasting discomfort. She knew herself well enough to be fully conscious that she was not made for economy. There were of course many little economies which had to be practised in Sloane Street; and these she practised with cheerfulness, always hating them, but regarding them as a transient evil from which the good marriage which she was determined to make would open a way of escape. So it was with deliberation that she was enduring at this time the very real unhappiness of having dismissed her lover.

It was for the sake of Anne that the dismissal was given with the altruistic lie that gave it its air of finality. But for the sister whose tender secret had been disclosed to her first by the irrepressible Netty, and then by a hundred little observations of her own, Miss Norfolk might well have kept Leigh dangling on. Had she done this she would, as it turned out, have been able to follow the dictates of heart and head which would for once have joined in a common cause; but she did not know this at the time, and so deserved thence no merit, nor claimed it. It may be said that she deserved none at all, since she only gave away that which she felt that she could not keep; still it must be remembered that she could, had she wished it, have refused her lover in such a way as to have kept him her lover still, or indeed, having refused him, have recalled

him when his good fortune came to him. But in saying that he was happy with Anne she exceeded somewhat her definite knowledge of the case. There could be no doubt that Anne had lessened for him the severity of the blow of Harry's refusal of him. There was that in the sweetness of Anne's unselfish nature that made her eminently adapted for a giver of comfort. She was of the type from which are drawn Sisters of Mercy. She was patient, modest, unassertive.

Dennis coming straight from Harry, and smarting actively under the pain of his rejection, had met her in Sloane Street. She was carrying a small canvas and some brushes. He was going to pass her by, but something in his face arrested her attention, and she put out her hand.

"Oh, what is the matter?" she said, apprehensively.

He was suffering acutely, and before he was almost aware of his intention, he had given voice to his woe.

Anne listened to him with tears in her eyes.

"I don't believe it," she said at last, and trembling. "I don't believe she doesn't care for you. She is deceiving herself."

Dennis shook his head.

Anne had turned about, and she walked down with him as far as Sloane Square.

"I am sorry," she said. "Oh, I am sorry."

He held her hand gratefully when she said good-bye, and looked long into her eyes. He saw for the first time a likeness in her to her sister. It was the merest family likeness. Netty and Ethel had it far more strongly, and one could trace it even in the twins. But he saw it in Anne then, and, taken in conjunction with her sympathy, it brought about certain results.

Abbot was away at this time. He had scraped together sufficient money to enable him to pay a long-deferred visit to some relations in the North, and Dennis was alone. He had just then a dire need of some one to whom he could talk of himself and his unhappiness. This was in itself a sign that he was not in his normal condition. He tried to write, and he could not. His London letters cost him horrible trouble. He put them off till the last moment, and wrote them under the stress of dire urgency. He could not afford to risk the consequences of having them late. He forced them from a barren pen. He posted them with the pleasing knowledge that they were sufficiently dull and unreadable to jeopardize his commission, even though they were punctual. After all, what matter? He had nothing to work for. Of what consequence was it whether he struggled to live or not. Then he thought of Anne.

Some men came in to smoke. He sat silent amongst them, and they had to remind him of hospitable duties with regard to the whiskey-bottle and soda-water. One of his guests made up the fire for him. It was falling low, and he had not remarked it. When twelve struck he said something which had been on his tongue for an hour.

"I'm very sorry. I don't know what you'll all think of me. I must get you fellows to go. I am out of sorts to-night."

There was a chorus of sympathy.

"Poor old chap. Dear old Leigh, why didn't you tell us?"

There was a getting up, and a looking for hats.

"Oh, it is nothing," said Dennis. "Come another night, like good chaps. I am not myself to-night."

"Anything one could do for you?"

"Nothing, thanks. Only forgive me for being such bad company. Good-night. Have some more whiskey before you go. Won't you? I feel an awful boor for sending you away."

The men—there were four of them—shook his hand warmly, protesting that it was not a matter for apology, and they quite understood. When they had taken their departure he wondered what they said outside, and regretted that he had not borne with them for another hour. They had not

been gone five minutes when there was a knock at his door. He opened it and saw one of them had returned.

"Saltash?"

"Yes. I won't keep you a minute. No, I won't come in. Dennis, tell me something."

"What?"

"Is it money? Forgive me. If fifty pounds would be any good——"

"No, it isn't money. My dear George!"

Leigh took his hand and wrung it.

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure. But how am I to thank you?"

"Well, that is all. No, I won't come in. Good-bye, Dennis. I wish you well through it, whatever it is. If I don't come to look you up, it will be because I am out of town. Good-night, old chap."

He ran downstairs, and Leigh shut the door. He went to the fireplace, and thought how full of kindness the world was still. Thence he thought of Anne. Then he wished to talk to Anne—he wished somehow to tell her of the goodness of his friend Saltash. Above all, he wished to see her because she reminded him of Harry.

So it came that Dennis Leigh met Anne Norfolk at the door of the studio on the following day, and walked back with her to Sloane Street. Anne timidly approached Harriet that night.

"Harry."

"Well, sister Anne?"

"I want to say something to you."

"Say on, sister Anne."

Then Anne, emboldened, and fighting for one who was dearer to her than all else the world contained, pleaded the cause of Dennis.

"It is no good," said Miss Norfolk, when she had heard her sister to an end. "I have given him an answer. I haven't much in the way of a mind, sister Anne, as minds go, but when I make it up I abide by it."

"Oh, Harry, he is so unhappy. I would not say anything, but I don't think you are happy either——"

"Anne!"

"Oh, I must say it, Harry. I can't help thinking that you do care for him. Don't you? Don't you, Harry? Why won't you be fair to yourself?"

"I don't care for anybody," said Miss Norfolk. But she said it in a voice that somehow left her sister unconvinced.

"Are you sure you don't care for him? Couldn't you get to care for him?"

"I don't think I could ever get to care for him——"

Anne could not know that Harry to herself added, "more than I do at this moment." Nor

could Anne know that when she left the room Harry buried her face in the pillows on her bed.

So Leigh continued to meet Anne at the studio door, and not many days passed before he offered to her the pieces of his shattered heart.

"Of course you must say yes," said Miss Norfolk, decidedly.

Anne was deceived, and she dwelt in the Seventh Heaven.

When there came the change in the prospects of Dennis, Harry went away to stay in country houses. Netty wrote her accounts of the happiness of Anne.

"We are so much in love," ran one of these letters, "that Art, even Art, plays second fiddle. We meant to have painted a big picture for the Academy, but I don't think that we shall now. We hear from Dennis most days, though we see him every day, and we write to him constantly. We wear odder hats than ever, but we have grown very pretty. We are very happy, and—the house for such as are not in love is rather dull."

All of which but little expresses the joy of Anne. She was another girl. Every day as it broke was a new ecstacy. She marveled that it should be to her that this great good had come. Sometimes she had a misgiving that the Fates must have erred in showering it upon her, and that sooner or later they would find out that after all she was only Anne, and

they would take it away from her. But generally her heart was too light for misgivings or presentiments.

But the change in the fortunes of Dennis Leigh, which for Anne added nothing to his attraction, and only seemed good in so far as it benefited him and made the possibility of marriage less remote, unsettled him in spite of himself. It made him think of Harry once more, and it made him speculate as to what her answer might have been had his uncle's young wife eloped, and his heir been killed, before the proposal was made. All, he thought, might have been different. He knew far too well the sordid restraints of poverty to be surprised that any girl should refuse to link her fate with it. This thought suggested the possibility that Miss Norfolk in saying "I do not love you" had used the words, not because she meant them but because they were calculated to put an end to hopes which might otherwise have been cherished, and have led to merely a long and indefinite time of waiting, ending in nothing. Some words spoken by Anne recurred to him. Anne had expressed her conviction that Harry was deceiving herself.

Dennis thought over all this till such comfort as he had derived from his engagement to the sister of his beloved turned to gall.

CHAPTER XXII.

Mrs. Ruthven had never accomplished anything with less difficulty than the engagement of Hartford to Araby. There was a certain analogy between the case of these two and that of Dennis Leigh and Anne Norfolk. Dennis was in love with Harry who refused him, and so passed on to Anne. Hartford was infatuated with Mrs. Ruthven. . . .

His devotion was honest and sincere. He wished to attach himself to her. He felt that he could not do so more effectually than by marrying her daughter. Araby made little resistance. It must be remembered here that nothing that could be said to amount to the smallest basis for hope had passed between her and Gerald. Araby, struggling at this time to appraise things justly, realized this to her own young despair. She had been foolish enough to give her whole heart to one who had not asked for it. That then, speaking roughly, was her own look-out. Almost unconsciously the apparently trifling falsehood which her mother had told her, even though Araby suspecting it to be a falsehood imagined that she was placing no reliance upon it, served

to strengthen her conviction that Gerald meant nothing by such attention as he had shown her. Why should he mean anything? She was very unhappy. She knew that life with her mother was impossible. She was lonely. She looked on into the future with growing dread. It seemed to her that Gerald had only come into her life to disquiet it further. She tried to put him from her. He had only caused her pain. Let her forget him; but she could not harden her heart against him.

It was when the knowledge that she could not continue to bear the relations that existed between her and her mother was most clear to her, that Hartford's offer pointed to a way of escape. She saw with alarm that it was in the light of a way of escape that she regarded it.

The blue weather that succeeded the snow she associated afterwards with a period of perplexity such as had never before fallen to her. She gave no decided answer at once. She asked for two days' grace, and she employed them in trying to think out her position. She had no one to consult. She shrank with a chivalrous loyalty to her mother from confiding in the Miss Woottons. She had never told them of her unhappiness. To ask their advice in this crisis would have been to confess to what she had borne in the last six months, and she had the strongest aversion to admitting the facts which she

had hitherto concealed. She took long walks, and did battle with herself. Gaunt elms bore witness to her suffering—and once a human being. This was Cora Pine. Miss Pine had taken a rooted dislike to Mrs. Ruthven. It had chanced on the next day after Mrs. Ruthven's arrival at Eccram that, in Eccram church, Miss Pine gathered something of the nature, and its significance, of Mrs. Ruthven's manner to her daughter. Miss Pine was in the organ-loft, and Mrs. Ruthven, down below and unconscious of her presence, snubbed Araby, who was showing her the windows. What was said does not concern us. It was only a few stinging words such as Araby had often heard before, but Cora Pine flushed crimson in the darkness of the loft, and there was after that one person in Eccram who did not like Mrs. Ruthven.

It was ten days later, and on the second of the two days which Araby had asked for the consideration of the proposal of Hartford, that Miss Pine had a further glimpse of her unhappiness. Araby was walking back from Long Eccram woods, whither her unrest had taken her. The day was fine. A warm sunlight that was the first promise of spring lit up the morning. The brown hedgerows were alive with birds that twittered. A chaffinch for some two hundred yards preceded Araby as she walked, darting from its twig as she approached it

to another at a short distance further on. There had been rain. The grass in the fields was in patches green, to the limit of bright green, and against it the red of grazing cattle stood out with insistence. A horse looked over a gate. Araby paused abruptly to pat his head. Some black pigs in another field gazed inquisitively at the lonely girl as she passed them. They grunted and scampered away. The sky was flecked with white clouds which were dazzling in the sunlight. It was a day for rejoicing. Nature seemed to have thrown off the shackles of winter, and to the reveling in the delight of a foretaste of the days that were to come.

Araby left the road to cross the fields. Suddenly the very beauty and exuberance of the day overcame her. She felt herself to be outside all these glad things that were singing, and she sat down upon a felled tree and cried. She did not see nor care that the green of the bark stained her serge dress. Nothing mattered. Gerald was not for her, and it was of very little importance for whom she herself was destined. A couple of colts, all legs and slenderness, ventured near to her, and then took alarm at their own temerity, and cantered away immaturely. She did not heed them. This was the final struggle; when it was over she would dry her eyes.

She rose after a time. She saw then the damp

green powder that clung to the rough nap on her skirt, and she brushed away as much of it as she could so dislodge, and went on her way. Her lips no longer trembled, but no one who saw her face, white and pink, could have doubted that she had been crying.

It was thus that she met Cora Pine. Miss Pine was nothing if not parochial, and she was on her rounds with the parish magazine. Many a penny which might have procured such delights as the *Family Herald* or the *London Journal* was produced reluctantly from a mug on a cottage shelf to buy this periodical, the cover of which was under the editorship of the Vicar's daughter.

"Such a busy morning," she said, energetically. "I've been all round the Green—every house except the Hares', where the children have got measles—and down the London road as far as the forge, and then across to the Jenkins', and up to the Hill Farm, where I went for nothing, because Mrs. Attley wouldn't take a copy—says she can't spare the penny from the housekeeping; fancy when they were having pork for dinner—I saw it on the kitchen table. And now I have to go to four houses in Long Eccram. You don't do any parish work now?"

"You see I am a visitor," said Araby.

"You've been crying," said Miss Pine, with suddenness and no tact.

Araby colored deeply. Miss Pine tried to retrieve her unfortunate speech, and blundered further. She said something about her brother Herbert, who had gone away.

"You see he has only his profession," she said.

It was then two crimson girls who stood in the field. They felt that the subject must be changed before they went on their several ways. Araby had a nervous fear that Cora would kiss her.

"Isn't it . . . doesn't the sun . . ." began Araby, desperately. She paused and recovered herself. "I mean, one appreciates a day like this after the long winter, doesn't one?"

"It cheers one up," said Miss Pine, without any marked self-possession. "The trees will soon be budding, won't they? There was a crocus out in our garden this morning—at least something was out, I forget what, but perhaps it wasn't a crocus. I must be getting on. If Long Eccram wasn't so far, I'd ask you to turn about and walk with me. I'm going to the Greens and the Hebblethwaites and old Appleby's——"

"I am going home to lunch," said Araby.

"I am so annoyed at Mrs. Attley giving up the Magazine—and with pork for dinner," said Miss Pine. "Don't you find that little things quite put you out sometimes?"

"Yes," said Araby, "little things put me out."

"And they might easily have done without apple-sauce, and spared the penny for the Magazine. I don't know that it was the pork that seemed to me so extravagant as the apple-sauce. Polly Attley, the little lame one, you know, was peeling them—the apples, I mean. And I have a Magazine left on my hands; it is too bad!"

"Let me take it from you."

"But the Miss Woottons have had theirs. I always send them to the big houses first. I am afraid the ones for the parish are very late this month. Still, if you will have one it will put my accounts right. You see I entered them in the book before taking them round."

The girls parted.

Miss Pine had drawn many conclusions.

Araby walked fast, and with flushed cheeks.

"She thinks I am in love with her brother," she said to herself. "I!—with Herbert Pine! She apologized as it were for his going away! Oh! Oh! Oh! I am so angry with her. I shall never be able to like her again. It was dreadful. It was dreadful. Oh . . . Gerald!"

She burst into tears again. Her pride, which had called them forth, presently dried them. A brook with soft gurglings ran through the meadow. It was shallow and clear and clean. Araby knelt down beside it on a flat dry stone, and dipped her hand-

kerchief into the water. Then she washed her face and dried it as best she could upon the damp cambric, which, naturally, no amount of wringing would make quite dry. After that she felt better.

She took Cora Pine's Magazine and stuck it in a hedge.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHETHER the indignation that resulted from her meeting with Cora Pine hastened her decision or not, Araby accepted Hartford that afternoon.

Mrs. Ruthven professed herself overjoyed, and kissed her daughter, and told her future son-in-law that he might kiss Araby and herself.

The Miss Woottons, who had in the beginning regarded the arrival of the young man with as much trepidation as if some unfamiliar animal, of whose probable habits they were absolutely ignorant, proposed to make its abode with them, had, as their gaunt timidity wore off, taken a great fancy to Hartford. He annoyed them in nothing. He forbore to smoke in the dining-room after dinner, and made himself quite happy in a little room off the library, which was turned into a smoking-room on his account, as soon as it was understood by the Miss Woottons that to smoke was one of the habits of his kind. Hither Mrs. Ruthven, sometimes bringing Araby, sometimes alone, accompanied him at night. Whiskey and soda-water (from the grocer's in Eccram village) made their appearance

there, when the Miss Woottons had further gathered that these came under the head of the natural food of the male.

Before his arrival there had been many domestic discussions as to his treatment. The venerable Abigail, with the keyboard smile, had wondered whether she ought to go into his room in the morning to place his bath. Miss Wootton had thought that the water should be left at the door—a can of cold water for the bath, and a jug of hot water for shaving. The butler said——

"Leave it to me, 'm. The young gentleman is my affair. The man-servant waits on the gentlemen, and the maid-servants on the ladies. Leave it to me, 'm. It'll be all right."

"And his clothes," said Miss Wootton; "oughtn't they to be brushed and folded?"

"And laid out on a chair," said the butler, bridling with pride at a knowledge of his duties: "coat and vest first, then trousers, if you'll excuse me naming them, shirt over the back, socks inside out ready for wear, and collar and tie on the top. Boots, shoes, gaiters, and cetera under."

Things settled themselves when Hartford and Mrs. Ruthven arrived. The Miss Woottons found him less formidable than they had expected. In a week his manners (his best) charmed them. He held their wool for them. He volunteered to go their

She did not devine his presence until he had crept up behind her and put his hands over her eyes.

small messages. He talked to them, and appeared interested in their narrow lives. Moreover, he had brought a top hat in which to go to church on Sundays. This pleased them, for Herbert Pine since his emancipation had evoked unfavorable comment at the Hall by appearing in church in what Miss Wootton called his everyday clothes.

Mrs. Ruthven had possibly instructed Hartford upon such points as promised scope for pleasing the old ladies. But Hartford was naturally domestic. He liked the good Miss Woottons for themselves, though much connected with their old-maiden lives amused him, and he could laugh with Mrs. Ruthven when she said of the worsted-work drawing-room that the word "Chenille," though she could neither explain nor justify it, somehow expressed the period that pervaded the decorations. The Chenille Age became a catch-word between them.

Mrs. Ruthven rode, and she drove, and she walked at this time to fill the hours and employ her thoughts. She was not in a happy frame of mind, but she had absolute control of herself. She had the satisfaction of knowing that by devoting herself to Corbet's aunts, she had overcome any prejudice that might have existed at one time in their minds against her, and that they believed in her, and even liked her. She knew Araby well enough to count upon her loyalty. She received Araby's decision with sincere thankfulness.

Hartford was an orphan. He came of a good family. He had money. And his only near relations were his two sisters who lived with a paid chaperon in the small place that belonged to him in Yorkshire. There was no one to interfere with anything that he (or Mrs. Ruthven) might choose to arrange.

Mrs. Ruthven protested to herself that she was not doing so badly for Araby. The marriage was sufficiently brilliant. Hartford, if not a man with whom she herself could have fallen in love, was at least very amiable. Araby ought to be grateful to her.

The lady did "protest too much, methinks." Still it was something, perhaps, that where Araby was concerned she should have tried to justify herself at all, or even for a while. The falsehood she had told weighed possibly upon her conscience. She spent much time in trying to convince herself that her daughter's contemplated marriage had nothing to do with Gerald nor anything that she might have said of him. Still Araby had threatened to become a barrier between Gerald and herself. With Araby safely married, all danger of the discovery of the false complexion which her mother had put upon his attitude would vanish, and Gerald would come back on to that footing of close friendship with Mrs. Ruthven, whence she felt that it was Araby who had threatened to dislodge him.

"Very well, I own it," said Mrs. Ruthven to herself, when at length she found that she could not be convinced by her own arguments. "I own it. What do I care? What do I care? What should I care? I am an unnatural mother. When did I ever tell myself that I was not? I did not love my child from the beginning. I nearly died when she was born. I am unnatural; well, I am unnatural. I don't care, I don't care, I don't care. I did not make myself. If I had been given natural affections, I should have had them. I am marrying my only child to a man she does not care for, because I am jealous of her, and because if I do not Gerald will find out that I told her a lie about him. That is the truth. What do I care?—what do I care?—what do I care? I am a pagan. All right. I am a pagan. I admit everything. Now I feel honester."

She was like a naughty child glorying in its naughtiness and defiant in its mutiny. There was something that was elementary in this woman.

"And when Araby is married," she thought further, "I will get some fun out of life still. I will—make Gerald love me. I will make him suffer."

She threw back her arms. Something fell. It was the emerald ring which had slipped from her finger, and at this moment, with the green flash of the stones, there darted across her a recollec-

tion of the wish of the giver of it—a wish in the form of a curse.

Araby for her part felt easier in her mind when she had given her answer. She looked upon it as binding, final, irrevocable. She set herself to consider the man with whom she had undertaken to pass her life. If it be possible to like a person as to whose next speech or action you feel no particular curiosity, Araby thought she could like Hartford. There was at least, she thought, nothing in him to disapprove. He was unaffected and a gentleman. She gathered generally from what she had seen of him that he was easily led, and that his opinions took their color to a certain extent from those of his neighbors of the moment, also that he was good-natured and frank. She did not know his susceptibility, nor the love-affairs with which he troubled an otherwise even life. If she had known this side of his character he might have increased for her in interest. There was a lifetime before her in which to learn.

Four letters were written to Corbet Ruthven that night. His wife wrote, announcing with discreet and measured elation the conquest which Araby had made. She described Lewis Hartford and his position. Hartford wrote, asking definitely for the hand of Araby, and stating such settlements as he was prepared to make. Araby wrote at her mother's

suggestion, endorsing the request for his consent. She thought herself that this was the first constrained letter which she had ever written to her father, but subsequent events showed that its constraint had not struck him. Miss Wootton wrote to say how warmly both she and her sister approved their niece's choice.

Then Mrs. Ruthven surprised every one by anticipating her husband's consent, and making certain arrangements for her daughter's trousseau.

Olympe startled Araby by the way in which she took the announcement of the engagement.

"To Monsieur 'Arfor'!" she said. "To Monsieur 'Arfor'! *Pas possible.*"

"Why not, Olympe?"

"So sudden, mademoiselle! So sudden! So young, you, to marry! And to Monsieur 'Arfor'! I lose my breath."

Olympe thought a good deal in the days that followed. She of all concerned was perhaps the one person who guessed something approaching to the truth of the case. She was in a state of no little perplexity. She loved Araby, and in her way she was devoted to her mistress also. She saw that their interests were in conflict. Like Mrs. Sandon, she was alarmed for both. She wondered whether she ought to keep to herself the incident of the broken frame, and that which she thought she had discovered

from Gerald's manner. She asked herself whether it was sentiment merely that led her to suppose that Araby had given her heart to him, and he his to her. If indeed it was not her own love of romance—and the conviction was strong upon her that she was right—what ought she to do? In the absence of Gerald, that was being arranged which must for ever part him from Araby. In her uncertainty she said nothing to Araby, and she gave to Gerald the hint of which we know.

Araby herself puzzled Olympe. She appeared to settle down almost complacently into her engagement to Hartford. She scarcely even looked unhappy.

Hartford, finding at length an object upon which to expend his affections legitimately, transferred a certain amount of his devotion from Mrs. Ruthven to Araby. He left Eccram for a few days and paid a visit to his sisters at home. Then he spent a couple of days in London, saw his solicitors, and bought Araby some presents and a ring. Thus laden he returned to Eccram.

Mrs. Ruthven asked him whom he had seen in London.

"Not a soul."

"Not at your club?"

"Some men I know of course. No one particular."

"Not Mr. Ventnor?"

"I asked about him. He is still away."

Mrs. Ruthven looked relieved. She had certain plans.

Hartford asked for Araby. She had not known the exact time Lewis had settled for his return.

"You will find her at the church," said Miss Wootton. "She has gone there to practise the organ."

Hartford found her in the loft. She was playing Chopin's *Funeral March* with feeling and some inaccuracy. He stole up the creaking stairs on tiptoe. She did not divine his presence till he had crept up behind her and put his hands over her eyes. She gave a little cry, and struck a false chord. The discord swelled through the empty church. He sat down beside her on the seat.

"You frightened me," she said, "you startled me. Why didn't you speak? you might have warned me!"

He tried to take her hand. Perhaps the music had unnerved her. She had been playing perhaps to the burial of her thoughts of Gerald. For whatever reason, she drew away her hands and burst into tears.

The old man who blew the organ peered round the corner. What he saw gave him the impression that the lady had received her lover coldly.

Araby remembered his presence after a moment or two and told him that he need not wait. He shuffled away. Miss Pine met him as he crossed the churchyard. It was perhaps from what he told her garrulously that she formed her conclusion that Araby had been "bullied" into her engagement.

Araby recovered herself after a minute or two and was deeply contrite.

"I was startled, Lewis. You must forgive me. I thought I was alone, and I was startled."

He bore her no malice. He accepted her explanation without question.

"Tell me about yourself," she said, gently. "What have you done since you went away?"

"Have you missed me a little?"

"Yes," said Araby.

"I have a letter for you from my sisters," said Hartford. "They are very glad. Millicent made me describe you a dozen times——"

"A red-haired girl," said Araby, smiling. "I don't sound well in description."

"Yes, a red-haired girl," said Hartford. "Yet I think Millicent knows that you are beautiful. I said you were like that picture in the National Gallery—by what's-his-name."

"Oh, don't say that," said Araby, with a sudden gesture. It had been said once before by other lips.

"And this is your sisters' letter to me?"

He put an envelope into her hand.

"Shall I read it now?"

He nodded, and watched her as she read. Without the sun was setting, and the light was further stained as it passed through the colored windows. The brown oak of the seats in the nave caught tinges of crimson and green and blue. A brass plate in the wall shone. The empty pulpit looked gloomy in a darker spot. Here and there the whiteness of a marble tablet made itself conspicuous. A branch tapped a window with insistence. Hartford looked from Araby to a figure, in the glass, of the mother of Christ and of sorrows. Here, too, he saw a likeness. It vanished when Araby looked up and smiled.

"What a kind letter! How good of your sisters! How nice of them to write to me! Lewis, I shall like them. They write to me as if they knew me. I wish I could deserve all they say. Oh, I wish I could. But I will try. I will try. I will spend my life trying."

Hartford, susceptible to every influence of the moment, drew Araby closer to him. At this moment, at least, it was Araby who was dear to him.

She disengaged herself from the arm he had thrown round her and faced him.

"Lewis, I want to ask you something."

Like Herod he wished to grant any request she might make, before even knowing its import.

"But it isn't anything I want you to give me or to allow me. I want to know, Lewis, solemnly, whether you want to marry me? Oh, don't protest. Wait one moment and let me speak. I want to know whether you wish it of your own free will, for it came suddenly. We had seen little of each other, though we had met often enough before you came here; and, Lewis, I told you myself that I—how shall I put it?—had not had time to know whether I could learn to—to love you."

For answer he slipped the ring he had brought on to her finger.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It surprised Araby that her mother should stay on at Eccram. To one of Mrs. Ruthven's temperament the monotony of the life must have been somewhat trying. Mrs. Ruthven, however, when she had set herself a task had always sufficient strength of mind to carry it through. She could put up with present boredom for the sake of what was to come. Hartford had suggested his own departure once or twice, but for some reason or other she would not hear of it.

"Why should you go, my dear boy? You have nothing to do. The Miss Woottons are delighted to have you."

"But they can't have bargained for a visitation," said Hartford.

"We are all very happy," said Mrs. Ruthven. "Why break up a happy family? Araby likes to have you here. I like to have you here."

He submitted.

Olympe had a theory that Mrs. Ruthven did not wish to let him out of her sight. She had a further theory that Mrs. Ruthven had her motives

for staying on herself at Eccram, and that these motives were in some way connected with Mr. Ventnor. This made the Frenchwoman vaguely uneasy, as indeed, at this time, did any thought of Gerald. She saw that by not returning to London her mistress was putting herself to great expense. The Bond Street milliner, into whose hands had been entrusted the order for Miss Ruthven's *trousseau,* had sent down a representative to Eccram. Olympe knew her mistress to be well enough off to afford many small extravagances, but with a house in London to which she could have gone while these arrangements were being made, the reasons must be potent which induced her to add the significant item of charges for time and traveling to a bill which must of necessity in itself be large. There was also, thought Olympe, an appearance of haste in the whole proceeding. She was ill-at-ease, but what could she do?

So the days passed.

"I am very happy about Araby's marriage," Mrs. Ruthven said a dozen times to the elderly mistresses of Eccram. "People might think, of course, that she was rather young, but, for myself, I think there is something beautiful in a girl marrying before she is disillusioned."

"My only fear," said Miss Wootton, "is that Araby is perhaps a little inexperienced."

"Oh, but experience comes so quickly," said Mrs. Ruthven. "I didn't know mutton from beef when I married."

"I am going to see if I can get *The Complete Housekeeper and Young Wife's Companion* in the village," said Miss Laura. "Araby will find it a great help."

"I long to hear from Corbet," said Mrs. Ruthven; "I asked him to cable."

Araby walked and talked with Hartford, but when she was silent she thought of him no things that were unutterable. On the whole she was not discontented. There were moments, however, when the recollection of Gerald filled her with a regret such as used to be described as poignant. She was destined, she supposed, for a life of indifferent happiness—but oh, the happiness which had been shown to her for a moment and denied her! She passed a night in tears. Olympe nearly spoke but was silent. What had she, in point of fact, to tell? And Araby, ignorant that happiness had been nearer to her than she thought, suffered the days to pass.

Nothing but the refusal of her father's consent could now break off the engagement into which she had voluntarily entered, and she did not think it likely that he would refuse it. She scarcely even wished it. In a manner she had grown fond of Hartford. It was as well, she told herself, that she

should marry him as any one else. He would be kind to her and considerate. He had an even temper, and his affection for animals argued much that was good.

After the explanation, such as it was, in the organ-loft in Eccram church, of the conditions upon which the engagement must clearly be understood to rest, Araby made no further allusion to the limitations of the feelings which she entertained for him. He appeared to be satisfied with as much of her heart as she was prepared to give him.

She dreaded just then the mention of Gerald's name and yet she wished for it. It came one day as she was riding with Hartford. They cantered down one of the straight sandy roads leading through Long Eccram woods. The smell of pines hung in the air. There were narrow avenues between the trees, regular as the lines of a Kentish hop-garden. Araby's color mounted with the exercise. A soft wind whistled in her ears, and a lock of her hair was loosened. She slackened her pace to a trot and then to a walk. Hartford watched her as, with a deft movement of her hands at the back of her head, she twisted in the escaped tress.

"We will go up Bracken Hill," she said, "I want to show you the view. On a clear day you can see three counties."

They emerged from the road presently on to a

rough incline up which they walked their horses. The road was loose and uneven. It wound with dips and risings upwards round the hill. When the summit was reached, however, the view repaid the riders.

"How wonderfully one sees," said Hartford, standing up for a moment in his stirrups. "That's Eccram church, isn't it, down there to the right?"

He made other comments, then he looked in the direction whence he had just come with Araby. "How splendid the pine woods look from up here. I believe I can smell them still."

"I can," said Araby. "I should like to live in a pine forest. I should like to be a charcoal-burner in a German story—would that entail living in a pine forest? Would it be pine? I don't know, but I like to think so. There would be cones all strewn about. You would kick them as you walked, and you would breathe in the scent of resin. I could believe in elves and pixies in a forest. Do you know the elastic slipperiness of the ground under firs?"

Hartford with amusement, and watching Araby's sparkling eyes, said that he thought he knew.

"Well, they would dance, and slide, and jump on it, and then they would sit down to rest on a big crimson fungus. In the autumn in those woods, down there, there are wonderful red and orange mushrooms."

"I am going to marry a child," said Hartford to himself. He had not before seen Araby so light-hearted. She left her fairies presently, and went back with a little glad laugh to her charcoal-burning.

"And there would be nice charred rings when the fires were out," she said, looking at Hartford abstractedly. "And you could roast potatoes in the hot ashes; you would rake the flaky wood cinders over them. Don't you like roast potatoes? Don't you always want to stop and buy them in London when you pass a baked-potato can?"

"I can't say that I do," said Hartford, smiling; "I remember though once another chap and myself buying a man's whole stock. It was last year, in the winter—one of those biting cold nights—and we were taking a short cut back from some theatre, I forget which, and we saw three kids shivering on a door-step. One of 'em begged from us, and we went on, and presently we passed a potato-can, and I'm blessed if the chap I was with didn't go back and fetch those three dirty little kids, and we filled them with baked potatoes. A lot more little hungry devils turned up too, and we pretty well cleared the man out."

"How nice of your friend to go back. I like him for it," said Araby.

She turned her horse's head homewards as she spoke. Hartford followed suit.

"One of the best-hearted chaps that ever breathed," he said. "But you know him too. Of course you do! It was Ventnor—Gerald Ventnor."

Araby said nothing. Perhaps her hand tightened on the bridle, for her horse curveted and tossed his head restlessly. Araby laughed no more, nor did she talk again of fairies or charcoal-burners, though the woods, as she rode back through them with Hartford in a light that the afternoon mellowed at every moment, looked more beautiful than ever. The long straight avenues gained in mystery. The breeze stirred the tree-tops and made the noise of a distant sea. Below there was a marked stillness. There were no birds. Shadows grew more pronounced. A pool which Araby knew to be shallow looked deep and secret.

"What an evening!" said Hartford. "Look at the light on that moss. It makes it look like crumpled gold-leaf."

Araby assented. He brought his horse nearer to hers.

"What has come over you, Araby?"

She shook her head without speaking.

"There is something sad in your pine woods after all," he said then. It was as if her depression was communicated to him. "We are the only souls in them. Listen."

They drew rein.

"What silence! There is nothing stirring but the breeze." He leant towards her from his saddle. "Kiss me, Araby."

But Araby's horse started.

"Well, no matter," he said, and they rode home.

CHAPTER XXV.

HAVING thought of Gerald, Hartford spoke of him once or twice that evening. A gloom fell over Araby as before. One would have said that the subject had little interest for Mrs. Ruthven. She changed it. But it made her restless. The dullness of the evenings at Eccram was becoming almost more than she could bear.

Every night the two Miss Woottons played a game of chess. It was their invariable wont when they were alone, and though out of civility to their visitors they had abstained from it for a few days, they had resumed their custom with alacrity when Mrs. Ruthven had assured them that it would not in any way seem unmannerly to their guests.

"We shall be interested in watching the progress of the game," she said. "I am sure, Laura, that you and Clara play scientifically, and that Mr. Hartford and I shall gain much by studying your play."

The Miss Woottons protested.

"I am afraid we play far from scientifically," said the elder, "though we play very carefully. We are evenly matched on the whole. You see, playing

so constantly—we didn't miss one night last winter——"

"Excepting Sundays," Miss Laura put in hurriedly.

"Excepting Sundays, of course," said Miss Wootton. "Playing so constantly, I was going to say, we get to know each other's methods."

"Pray go on then, Clara, with your games just as you would if we were not here. Mr. Hartford would not for worlds that you should alter your usual way of spending your evenings for him."

"No—please—" said Hartford.

And so the chess-board made its reappearance, and every evening the Miss Woottons sat gauntly opposite each other on high chairs, with their battle-ground between them.

"It is better than having to talk to them," said Mrs. Ruthven to herself, "and they get so absorbed in their game that they don't hear a word one says. We score two."

Mrs. Ruthven and Hartford played something which they called bézique on one evening and beggar-my-neighbor on another. They used counters, and settled up their debts afterwards in the smoking-room. Araby read, or worked, or sang. It was all very innocent and rather dull. Mrs Ruthven contrived, however, that Hartford should not find out that it was dull.

On the evening which succeeded the ride through Long Eccram woods Araby was not in a mood for singing, and her mother could not settle down to her gamble. Mrs. Ruthven's plain black dress made a rustling as it trailed across the carpet. The sound was the outward expression of the restlessness that possessed her. The Miss Woottons felt some disturbing influence, and looked up two or three times from the chess-board, at which it was their habit to gaze in contemplative silence. Mrs. Ruthven caught Miss Laura's eye once. Mrs. Ruthven's expression said as clearly and as impatiently as possible, "Well?"

Miss Laura returned hurriedly, and almost as if she had been snubbed, to her study of the chessmen.

Mrs. Ruthven went to a window and drew aside the curtain. She looked out. The grounds were all black at first. By degrees, as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, things took shape. An evergreen oak looked full and prosperous in contrast to the leafless elms. The shrubs outlined the left border of the lawn. A path showed itself presently. Things as she gazed came out in the darkness as stars come out to an intent student of the skies, where all before has seemed unlightened space. There were no noises in the night The peacefulness served only as an irritant to Mrs. Ruthven. She wished for India or London.

"I can't stand it much longer," she said to herself. "There are limits to what I can endure, and I have nearly reached them. I could break the window at this moment, or startle those old women by upsetting their chess-board, or do anything that would disturb this appalling monotony! I want excitement. This isn't life. I should grow old here in a year. It is stagnation that ages one. Oh, those old women! They get on my nerves with their mittens, and their wool-work, and their chess, and their doctrines. Araby irritates me because I am injuring her. Lewis irritates me because he can go to her from me. What greater curse can be laid on a woman than to be denied the domestic mind?"

Mrs. Ruthven felt that she had struck the keynote of her life.

"The domestic mind," she said; "yes, that is what I haven't got."

To know the cause of her ailment was not, however, to remove the one nor to cure the other. As a pendant to the thought came another fraught with elements of wide charity.

"I suppose," she said to herself with a shudder, "I suppose that it is circumstance that has kept for me my reputation. What if I had been born in another rank of life—without money, comfort, luxury . . . . ?"

The conclusion of the game of chess and the

simultaneous rising of the Miss Woottons interrupted her chain of thought.

"My revenge to-morrow night," Miss Laura was saying.

"You didn't play as well as usual," said Miss Wootton. "You didn't seem able to fix your attention. You ought not to have let me take your queen so easily."

Miss Laura looked in the direction of Mrs. Ruthven. Hartford helped Miss Wootton to put away the men, and then, excusing himself on the ground that he had letters to write, he said good-night all round and withdrew to the smoking-room.

Mrs. Ruthven followed him some ten minutes later. She found him with a pipe in his mouth and a pen in his hand. He was an indifferent scribe, and he hailed her entrance with relief as an interruption.

"Tell me something to put in my letter," he said, like a schoolboy.

He had directed an envelope during one of the pauses inevitable to the attempt to express himself upon paper.

"I never could write a letter," he said.

Mrs. Ruthven saw the address upon the envelope.

"Mr. Ventnor is not in London," she said; "Lennox Gardens won't find him."

"But his letters will be forwarded."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Mrs. Ruthven stirred the fire absently.

"Are you telling him of your engagement?"

"That's what I am writing for. I ought to have let him know sooner."

"Would you mind waiting till we hear from Araby's father?" said Mrs. Ruthven after an interval, during which she looked at the flames that leapt in the grate, and he nibbled the top of his quill. "If my husband cables as I asked him to we ought to get his telegram this week. I would rather not have the engagement made public till it has his sanction."

"You don't expect him to refuse it?"

"On the contrary, I think he will be glad to have you for a son-in-law, but I would rather you would wait before announcing the engagement."

"All right," said Hartford. "Though telling Gerald isn't exactly announcing it."

"No, it isn't; still wait a day or two."

"Very well," said Hartford.

He put away his writing materials with some alacrity, and stretched himself luxuriously in an easy-chair by the fire. Mrs. Ruthven left him presently.

She lay awake half the night, telling herself that her patience was nearly exhausted. The dullness

of Eccram had got a grip of her. It was appalling. She was wasting the precious hours of her life. Each day that she spent here was a day lost, and days make years. She fretted and chafed.

She tried to solace herself with the reflection that it was only for a few more weeks. She could not afford to lose them. She was in the case, she told herself, of one who knows the number of his days, and who sees them slipping from him without profit.

"I live for the minute," she said to herself, "and I am unsatisfied. I have made my choice. I have chosen the world and the things of it, and I am being cheated. I am being cheated. To-day is my day—what do I know or care about to-morrow? To-day is my day, and I am being robbed of the pleasure of it. It isn't fair. I have staked everything, if there be anything to stake, upon the present, and the present is giving me no return."

The wind rustled in the ivy outside her window. It cried in depressing cadences in the old chimneys of Eccram. It whispered through the leaves of the evergreen oak.

"Oh, oh, oh," said Mrs. Ruthven to herself, and changed her position.

A clock ticked with loud monotony. The steady sound caught her ear and arrested her attention. As she listened it seemed to her to be increasing in volume. This was the throbbing of the heart of

time. "Tick, tick, tick, tick . . . louder . . . louder . . . tick, tick . . . It was maddening! She drew the bed-clothes over her ears. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep. She opened them and looked on at the blackness of the room. The darkness appeared to move in revolving circles. It was a thing that you could watch. It seemed tangible. There were white spots in it. When she tried to count them they receded or they advanced, and one was absorbed into another.

So the night wore itself away. Since Mrs. Ruthven woke in the morning, it is to be supposed that at some hour she must have fallen asleep, but she had no recollection of the ending of her vigil. It may have ended at the moment of arriving at the decision that, come what would, she would now hurry on Araby's marriage. It would be necessary of course to wait for Corbet's consent, but, as she had said to Hartford, she did not expect him to withhold it. It might come now in the form of a telegram at any moment. All that remained then for her to do was to find or to invent some plausible excuse for wishing the wedding to take place without delay upon the receipt of her husband's message. To one of her infinite resource it would not be difficult to light upon cogent reasons for any consummation which she might desire. She had never yet failed to attain an end for lack of convincing

argument in its favor. Possibly the fact that truth in her hand was pliant served to help her through the world.

An excuse, however, came to her of its own accord, and without the necessity of warping pliant truth to meet her desire. It came through Mrs. Sandon in one of her rambling and unpunctuated letters.

"Never was so surprised about anything," it ran, "and of course I shall say nothing about it till you give me leave What an odd woman you are, Johnnie I do hope you are consulting Araby's happiness in the matter Lewis Hartford is a very good boy and from a worldly point of view I think Araby is doing very well for herself but do tell me whether it calls itself a love-match. Lewis was infatuated with you from the first but it never struck me that he and Araby ever took much notice of each other. I would give something to know the truth you naughty woman but I suppose I shall never know anything more than you chose to tell me I can't help laughing over the whole thing. It is too bad of you to charge me not to tell when I am dying to discuss you and your doings with some one I miss poor dear Lady Murgatroyd dreadfully. She used to be my safety-valve and whenever I was bubbling over with the excitement of some nice little bit of news or gossip I just asked her in to tea Poor dear

thing! Johnnie you bad clever woman do tell me all about it. Was it in your wicked heart when you whisked the young man off to Eccram with you Is he in love with Araby Is Araby in love with him How do the Miss Woottons regard the match What do they think of you—yes—what *do* they think of you—but then you would hoodwink the Old Person himself I dare say you talk copy-book and that Corbet's aunts think you a model young matron. . . ."

All this made Mrs. Ruthven chuckle as she read it, and put her into high good-humor. She felt like a mischievous child who has heard its naughtiness called clever.

Then in Mrs. Sandon's letter came that which would furnish an excuse if need be for the hastening of Araby's marriage. Mrs. Sandon was going abroad.

"I cannot face March in London and to justify my extravagance to myself I have got my doctor to prescribe the South of France I shall go to Cannes or Mentone. If it were not that I suppose you are tied just now I should ask you to come with me—I suppose it would not be any use but I dare say we should manage to have a good time."

Mrs. Ruthven took Hartford out for a walk that morning.

"We settled long ago," she said, as they strode sturdily along the London road, "we settled long ago that Araby should not have a big wedding, with bridesmaids and all the abominations."

"That is so," said Hartford. "It is a stipulation," he added, laughing, "that I always make."

"Then, Lewis, supposing I wished the marriage to take place soon——"

"How soon?"

"Very soon. I don't know. I only said supposing."

He waited for her to proceed.

"The fact is, I want to go abroad," she said. "Mrs. Sandon—I heard from her this morning—is going to Cannes, and she would like me to go with her. I don't want to give her an answer this minute, you understand; but I would not go of course till after Araby's marriage. So supposing that I wished that to take place soon—almost at once?"

"There is the answer from India," said Hartford.

"That of course," said Mrs. Ruthven. "We wait for that. I mean after."

"What does Araby say?"

Mrs. Ruthven swung her stick and cut off the head of a weed that was growing at the roadside.

"I haven't spoken to Araby yet on the subject. All this is conditional, don't you see—conditional on possibilities, and on my wishing to accompany Mrs. Sandon. I shall naturally be somewhat lonely when I lose my daughter, though, as you know, there isn't any very close sympathy between us. We are too differently constituted for that. You can see it for yourself, so I don't mind admitting it to you. Still, when Araby goes I shall miss her—whenever it may be. Supposing, then, I say, I should wish to go abroad with Mrs. Sandon—it is a chance of companionship for me—would you object to marrying Araby soon enough to make it possible for me to go?"

"No," said Hartford; "I shouldn't mind if Araby didn't."

"You can talk it over with her," said Mrs. Ruthven. "There doesn't really seem to be anything to wait for. If we had settled to have an elaborate wedding it would be different, but happily you hate all that as much as I do."

Thus Mrs. Ruthven dealt with Hartford. At luncheon she mentioned Mrs. Sandon's letter casually to the Miss Woottons and Araby. In the course of the afternoon she recurred to the matter, and said that she wished that she could accept the invitation.

"Of course I could not go till after Araby's wedding."

"And I suppose it would delay that too long to put it off till your return?" said Miss Wootton. "Otherwise Laura and I would be only too glad to have Araby with us till then."

"Oh yes; that would be impossible, I fear," said Mrs. Ruthven.

"When does Mrs. Sandon start?" asked Miss Wootton.

"She doesn't say definitely," answered Mrs. Ruthven. "Soon, I think. I suppose one day next week. Perhaps if I get Corbet's cable within the next twenty-four hours it might be possible to—No, that would be too ridiculous." Mrs. Ruthven laughed. "I could scarcely get Araby married in a week, could I?"

By the evening, however, every one in the house was accustomed to the idea that the wedding might take place very much sooner than had been expected.

Olympe knit her brows.

"I can do nothing," she said to herself, looking at the photograph of Araby in the frame which Gerald had had mended. "I see her go to the altar—yes, the altar of sacrifice!—and I can do nothing. Miserable that I am! *Oui, madame, je descends.*"

Her mistress was calling her, and she left the frame upon a table instead of putting it back into the trunk.

Araby went up to dress for dinner. She had spent the afternoon with Hartford in the library. She had found him very amiable, and she had wished for something more assertive in the manliness of the man with whom she was to pass her life.

"We shan't even quarrel," she said to herself with a smile.

She had been reading somewhere that the happiest marriages in the long run were those into which passion, on the part of one of the contractors at least, did not enter. Where illusion does not exist, disillusionment cannot follow.

"Then I should be happy," she said to herself. Her eye fell upon her own photograph. She took it up and looked at it, and she wondered whether in truth she was as pretty as the printed face. She was comelier now, did she know it, than when the likeness had been taken. Her face had gained in expression, her eyes were deeper. She sighed and began to dress. Presently she wondered how the photograph came to be at Eccram. She remembered leaving it in Primate Street. It stood upon a writing-table in that part of her bedroom which, with the help of a screen, she had made into a sort of minute sitting-room. She would ask Olympe about it.

The Frenchwoman, having attended to her mistress, came in after a time to help Araby with her

toilet. Araby, however, who was independent, had dressed herself.

"I had something to ask you, Olympe. What was it? Oh, yes, I remember. How did that photograph get here?"

She pointed to it as she spoke.

Olympe, who connected the frame with many things, was taken aback. She hesitated, and Araby looked at her in question.

"I ought to have told you, mademoiselle. I have a misfortune. I drop it. I break the frame."

"It isn't broken," said Araby.

"I—it was mended for me," said Olympe.

"Oh, Olympe! and you paid for it. I won't let you. You must tell me what it cost you. I see a little fresh bar of silver has been put on here at the back of it. You must tell me what I owe you."

Araby was generous always, and she had perhaps an exaggerated idea of the limitations of the income of a well-paid servant.

"But I broke it," said Olympe.

Araby persisted. She sought her purse.

"Stop, mademoiselle! I paid nothing. I will tell you. Monsieur Ventnor had it done for me."

"Mr. Ventnor?"

Olympe's hand shook. She scarcely knew at this moment whether or not she was going to tell that which she fancied she had discovered. It was

not too late, she told herself. Chance had brought up the subject; chance should determine the issue. There was a pause which seemed to Araby unending. In spite of herself she grew pale.

"He met me on the stairs," said Olympe; "he saw what I had done. He take the frame. It was after you come here. He look long—long—at—your face. Mademoiselle, mademoiselle——"

She caught the girl in her arms.

"He insist that he take the frame to mend. But it was not for me—not for me. It was because——"

Olympe, who was speaking quickly and with excitement, paused suddenly. The bewildered Araby followed the direction of her eyes to the door. Mrs. Ruthven came in radiantly with something in her hand.

"Your father's telegram, Araby," she said, and she kissed her daughter.

CHAPTER XXVI.

GERALD and Miss Norfolk drove to the station together, and paced the platform while they waited for the train, which presently arrived and conveyed them to the junction at which they parted, since their roads thence diverged.

"You are to cheer up," said Miss Norfolk, leaning forward from the corner of the carriage in which he had established her with her moderate equipments of comfortable travel, and speaking to him through the window. "You are to cheer up and to hope for the best, and to expect it—above everything to expect it. It will all come right. You will see. You mustn't brood. I didn't know you ever brooded——"

Ventnor smiled and looked down the length of the train.

"We have each learned something of the other in the last few days," he said.

Miss Norfolk watched his face. Presently he looked back to her.

"Yes, we know each other better," she said.

He asked her if she had a book or a paper. He

whistled up a newsboy and he bought a bundle of periodicals. They were oddly chosen, Miss Norfolk found, when she came to see what he had given her. One was the *Field,* another the *Bachelor,* another the *Queen,* another the *Practical Engineer,* a fifth a technical journal, the *Linen-Draper's Gazette and Haberdasher's Chronicle.*

"*Ce que c'est que d'être—amoureaux,*" she said to herself in the words of a play. "He doesn't know a bit what he's doing . . . poor boy! poor Gerald!"

Aloud she exhorted him once more to be hopeful.

"It will all come right," she said again. "You must get that well into your head. I will write to you as soon as ever I can. But you can't hear to-morrow, remember that. If possible you shall hear from me the day after. You are to take a lot of exercise and think of other things. You must hunt to-morrow. That will be good for you. Are we off now? Don't lean against the door. Don't hold on. You'll be run over. Good-bye, Mr. Ventnor. Good-bye. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Gerald. "Good-bye. God bless you."

Miss Norfolk threw herself back in her corner, and cried a little when the station was out of sight.

Gerald had a wait of an hour. He smoked in

moody silence, and read the advertisements upon the walls till he knew them by heart. An express dashed through the station, and occasional trains discharged or took up passengers. He wondered vaguely what were their several lives. Here were a husband and a wife in impatient argument. He caught a few of the words of the man.

"There is no reasoning with you. You bother one's life out. Then take your damned way and have done with it."

The speaker was obviously not ill-born, despite this forcible expression of his irritation. The woman was draggled and dowdy, but with care she would have been pretty. Gerald could fancy how easy it would be to lose patience with her. She had a look of querulous injury. Possibly each had at some time felt for the other that which he now felt for one in the world. What an ugly thought! Did nothing last? he asked himself. If so what matter whether one got one's wish or no? Then a thought of Araby's sweet face told him that cynical views of marriage were not for him. By no effort of his imagination could he conceive a state in which Araby and he might suffer from mutual irritation. He built then a castle in the air, which only crumbled and fell when he remembered Hartford.

The train came in which was to bear him to

Combe Lecton. He had rested little on the previous night, and he slept off and on till he reached home. His sister met him at the station.

"My dear Gwen! I didn't know you were here."

"We arrived last night, Gerald. I persuaded mother to come down for a bit. Oh, I am glad to see you again. I miss you so dreadfully when you are away, and mother and I had been shut up alone together in Lennox Gardens quite long enough; so when I heard that you meant to come here for the last of the hunting, I determined to come too. No, the cart will bring your things. I am driving the trap."

Miss Ventnor had so much to say that she did not at once remark her brother's silence.

"There was an article in the *Times* on father's speech at Hulworth. Did you see it? He is as pleased as Punch. And oh, Gerald, the stables are splendid! Do tell me all about yourself. The George Athols have sent out the invitations for Maud's wedding. I saw Maud last week. She asked me to be one of her bridesmaids. We are going to wear . . ."

And so on. All of which filled time, and saved Gerald the necessity of at once collecting his thoughts. At dinner, however, Miss Ventnor saw how they wandered, and with what an effort Gerald

joined in the conversation. The only subject which appeared to interest him, or at least upon which he seemed able to fix his attention, was that of the completed stables. The necessity for certain structural alterations, which had long been felt and discussed, had been met in the end by an almost entire remodeling of the buildings. Gerald had sold his hunters at the close of the previous season, and he delayed buying or even looking out for others till Combe Lecton should be ready to receive them. Sir John, who had gone up to town on the reassembling of Parliament, had left his own horses at his son's disposal.

Gwendolen Ventnor once having divined that her brother was harassed, asked no questions, but continued to express her sympathy by her manner. She was happy in the knowledge of the good-fellowship which existed between her and him, and she knew that his confidence would be given voluntarily or not at all. The evening passed uneventfully. Lady Ventnor worked, and talked disparagingly of her friends. She had lately told her daughter that Gerald was quite changed since making the acquaintance of Mrs. Ruthven (whom she designated as "that woman from India"), and any remarks that she now made about Mrs. Sandon were colored, Gwendolen knew to her amusement, by the fact that Lady Ventnor traced the mischief to Mrs. Sandon's door in Earl Street.

"She is going abroad," Lady Ventnor said, holding up her work to look at it obliquely. "I am very glad. I can always breathe more freely when I know that she is not in town."

Miss Ventnor said that she should have thought a capital was large enough to hold them both, and Gerald, meeting his sister's eye, and catching thence a smile, said——

"Besides, you're not in London."

Lady Ventnor caught always at side issues in her defence.

"And you mean by that, I suppose, that I am neglecting your father," she said. "I think you needn't say things of that sort on the very first evening of your return. You *know* that during the session he would much rather have the house to himself. I consulted him—Gwen will tell you—before coming down here."

"My dear mother, I meant nothing of the sort," said Gerald. There was a shade of impatience in his voice, but in his present mood he would not risk an argument. Lady Ventnor when she chose to be misunderstood was impracticable. He changed the subject, and when his mother went back to depreciation of Mrs. Sandon he forbore to protest.

His sister followed him to the smoking-room later on. She did not smoke herself, though she had no prejudices, and it was wholly for the pleasure of his

unrestrained companionship that she invaded the men's quarters. This was the moment to which she always looked forward when her brother was at home, and there were in the house no others of his own sex to bear him company. Sometimes he talked to her freely, often he said little, and it was her part to watch him thinking. But whether he was silent or not, Gwendolen knew well that he liked to have her with him.

He made a few comments upon the all-important stables, and then he lapsed into a reverie. When a log fell from the fire, and lay smoking on the hearth, he roused himself. After that he paced the room, with his hands in the pockets of the old blazer he wore for comfort. It had accompanied him through many troubles and perplexities, this old coat, since the Oxford days, but none more real than those which now disquieted him.

Gwendolen rose silently after a time, kissed him, and went up to bed. She listened for his step upon the stairs. It was more than an hour before she heard it. It came slowly and paused at her door. She thought that perhaps he was coming in to tell her what ailed him. Oh, if he would, how she would try to comfort him! But he passed on to his own room.

He hunted on the following day. Gwendolen and Lady Ventnor drove to the meet.

"Don't tell me Gerald isn't changed," Lady Ventnor said on the way home. "He wasn't a bit keen to-day——"

"Gerald never shows much enthusiasm about anything," said Gwendolen.

"But he does care for hunting," said Lady Ventnor. "You know he does. You want to blind me to what's going on. Oh, not round by Metly. Tell him—tell James not round by Metly. We very nearly headed the fox last time we drove that way."

"Which isn't any reason why we should this," said Gwendolen to herself. However, "straight home," she said aloud to the coachman. It was always useless to argue with Lady Ventnor.

"You want to blind me to what's going on," said Lady Ventnor again, "and I can see quite well. Gerald's in love with that horrid married woman. I am very sorry I ever called upon her. I oughtn't to have allowed myself to be persuaded against my better judgment. Why couldn't she stop in India with her husband?—a woman with a grown-up daughter too. It is disgraceful. And people did talk about Gerald going there before he left town."

Gwendolen said "Nonsense" good-humoredly.

"It is not nonsense," said Lady Ventnor. "I wish it was. And she left London directly after he did, and I dare say he has seen her while he has been away. She probably managed to get herself

asked to some of the houses where he stayed. That sort of woman is so pushing. I am surprised at the George Athols taking her up."

All this, or much that was like it, Miss Ventnor had heard so often before that she paid but little attention to it. For the first time, however, it struck her that as a basis for Lady Ventnor's fancies regarding her son, there was at least the groundwork of the fact that the Gerald who had come home to Combe Lecton was a distraught Gerald, and a Gerald over whom had come some change.

The day passed lengthily for her. At five o'clock she heard the sound of his horse's hoofs on the gravel of the drive. There were visitors in the drawing-room and she could not make her escape. When at length their carriage rolled away, Gerald was splashing in his bath. Half an hour later he went down to the smoking-room, and there Gwendolen joined him. He looked fresh and ruddy after his hot tub, as he lay in his flannels on the sofa he had drawn up to the fire. Gwendolen hoped as she noted this that his day had done him good.

"You are back early, aren't you? Did you kill?"

Gerald shook his head. If he had been himself he would have given her some account of his day, He dismissed it in a few words. His sister could see that his heart had not been in it.

"Shall I stop with you, or would you care to get a sleep before dinner?"

"Stop with me. Don't go because I don't talk. I don't think I shall go to sleep. You find me pretty bad company just now, I am afraid, Gwen?"

"No, Gerald, I don't. I should like to stay with you if I don't disturb you. I will fetch a book."

She went to a shelf and ran her eye along the volumes. They were a motley smoking-room set; some novels French and English, a few sporting books, a Shakespeare, some bound numbers of *Punch,* an odd volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* taken by some careless visitor from the library to whose shelves it belonged and not returned to its place, a copy of the *Arabian Nights,* a few poets. Gwendolen took down a copy of Longfellow.

"What's your book?" said Gerald.

She told him.

"Read me something."

"Yes, Gerald. What shall I read?"

She sat down on a low chair at the foot of the couch. Gerald shook his head, and she opened the book at random. She chanced upon the *Skeleton in Armor.*

Thus did all things at this time seem to lead back to Araby. Gerald's thoughts wandered as his sister read. Her voice sounded steadily through them as a note in a song is sustained against the air in the accompaniment. Words, a line, here and

there arrested his attenton. Fancy wove Araby's name into the ballad. She was the Norse maiden with the "soft eyes . . . . burning yet tender." He could see her standing in old Hildebrand's hall, where the shields gleamed and the minstrels sang, while her father's laugh blew the foam from the drinking-horn.

"Should not the dove so white
Follow the sea-mew's flight,
Why did they leave that night
Her nest unguarded?"

For Araby he thought he could have faced Hildebrand and twice twenty Norsemen. To the vigorous lines that followed he listened eagerly, though the thoughts and fancies that passed through his brain did not show themselves in any outward expression of excitement. One verse he made Gwendolen read twice—

"As with his wings aslant,
Sails the fierce cormorant,
Seeking some rocky haunt,
With his prey laden;
So toward the open main,
Beating to sea again,
Through the wild hurricane,
Bore I the maiden."

The words conveyed to him an idea of completeness

of possession that was grateful to him in his present frame of mind. But as his castles in the air had crumbled before, so did the exaltation which the poet's song had caused to his spirits disappear, and as suddenly. The death of the maiden, even though he had known it from the beginning, struck him like a chill.

> **"Still grew my bosom then,**
> **Still as a stagnant fen!**
> **Hateful to me were men,**
> **The sunlight hateful!"**

He pulled himself together and he called himself an idiot, but the restlessness that had spoilt for him a fine hunting day did not leave him. Afterwards he wondered whether he had not all day long been conscious of that which was passing at Eccram.

CHAPTER XXVII.

GERALD did not go to the smoking-room that night. His restlessness was such that he felt that he could not bear the limits of any place that had four walls. He went out at about ten o'clock, and he spent much of the night in walking. He had no definite aim. He kept to the high-road, and followed it for five or six miles. The sky was dark. There was no moon, and the stars were hidden by thick clouds. The hedges and trees looked black. There were no sounds in the night. The silence was sullen.

Some drops of rain fell, but Gerald, disregarding the warning, strode on. He passed through the village of Metly. There was little sign of life about it; a few men and a woman or two hung about the doors of the public-house. Gerald was recognized and hats were touched. He left the hamlet behind him. He was walking much as Mrs. Ruthven had walked once. He was trying in action to find relief from disquieting thought. Above all he wished to tire himself that he might sleep.

"To-morrow;" he said to himself. "To-morrow!"

In the morning Miss Norfolk's letter must surely arrive. He knew that she would not fail him, though what he expected to learn from her it would be difficult to say. At the lowest computation of her powers she was quick-witted, and he trusted to her to understand at a glance the situation which Eccram would present to her. What that situation might be he dared not conjecture. He bore Hartford no ill-will as yet. He knew him to be a man whom it was easy to guide. Hartford would be under the control of any puller of wires. Moreover, he was a sketchy person, whose individuality was so little assertive, that it would be difficult to impute to him any definite responsibility. You might like Hartford very much, but just as you would never dream of going to him for advice or counsel, so would you never hold him answerable for anything in which others also were concerned. Gerald remembered that even in the Eton days younger boys had been made accountable for misdemeanors, breaches of the peace, violations of the laws, for which Hartford as an agent should by right of his seniority have been amendable.

Gerald then attached small importance to Hartford's share in the conspiracy at Eccram, if it was indeed a conspiracy at all. But if it should turn out that the engagement of Araby to him had been brought about by coercion, then Gerald felt that such blame would fall to Mrs. Ruthven as would

make him hate her. It was perhaps a presentiment of what Gerald's attitude would be towards her if he discovered that it was she who was separating Araby from him, that, with the dropping of the emerald ring at Eccram, at the moment of vowing to make him love her, had suggested to Mrs. Ruthven's frightened imagination the terrible way in which the curse of the ring might be worked out. He would hate her, Gerald said to himself. The injury which she would have done him, and possibly Araby, would be too deep for forgiveness.

So, heeding nothing that he passed, he walked on in the darkness. A pond at the roadside was black as ink. A soft hissing sound came from it. It was the sound of the rain which now began to fall; it fell gently at first, then steadily in a down-pour. Gerald pulled his cap down over his eyes, turned up his collar, and set his face homewards. The night was no longer silent, it was filled with the noise of the rain. In twenty minutes Gerald was wet to the skin. The exercise of walking kept him warm. He strode on through the straight and steady lines of water that came from the black sky. The rain pattered on the leafless hedges; it splashed on the wet roads. Water ran in a jet from a pipe at the side of a house as he passed it.

He reached home at length, and still telling himself "To-morrow! to-morrow!" he went to bed.

He had accomplished his end. The warm glow that was engendered by a vigorous application of his bath towel was still creeping over him when he fell asleep.

Two letters lay beside Gerald's plate on the table the following morning. Lady Ventnor had her breakfast in her room. Gwendolen was alone in the dining-room and waited for her brother. She had heard him come in during the storm of rain. She was relieved from the anxiety this had caused her when presently he made his appearance looking none the worse for his drenching.

His eyes scanned the table and he took up his letters. Miss Ventnor had remarked casually that they were both in the same handwriting. Something in the way that he looked at them arrested her attention. One was written in pencil, and he opened it first.

"It is only an hour since I left you," he read, "and I am writing in the train. After all that we have told each other I cannot help telling you this: I had not read my letters when we started. They were from home. It is dreadful that the happiness of one person should come through the pain of another. The engagement between Anne and Dennis Leigh is broken off. You must gather what you will from this. Poor Anne! Oh, I am sorry for Anne."

That was all.

Gerald tore open the second letter. Gwendolen

watched him from behind the urn. She had a sudden conviction that this letter was of dire import. She saw it tremble in his hands, and by his face as he read, she knew that he had received a blow. She sprang to her feet and went over to him.

"What is it, Gerald?" she said, in a voice that did not sound like her own. "What is the matter? You have had bad news."

He did not appear to hear her. He looked up from the sheet of paper absently, and his eyes met hers, but she did not think that they saw her. He dropped the letter and picked it up. Then he looked into the fire.

The butler brought in a dish. Gerald watched him as he put it on the table. When the man was gone Gerald sat down and returned to his contemplation of the fire.

Miss Ventnor became alarmed. She knelt beside him and put her arms round his neck.

"Gerald!"

He did not speak.

"Gerald, my dear, dear Gerald."

He looked at her then.

"May I know?" she said.

For answer he put the letter into her hands. It was very short.

"What can I say to you?" it ran. "I have dreadful news for you. Mr. Hartford and Miss Ruthven were married yesterday by special licence."

Gwendolen looked at her brother.

"Oh, Gerald! and you cared for her. I didn't know."

She hid her face in her hands, and there was a long pause.

THE END.

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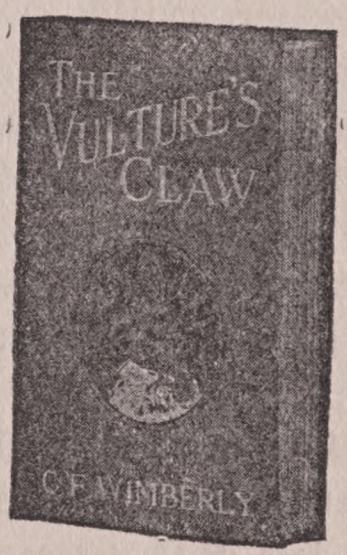

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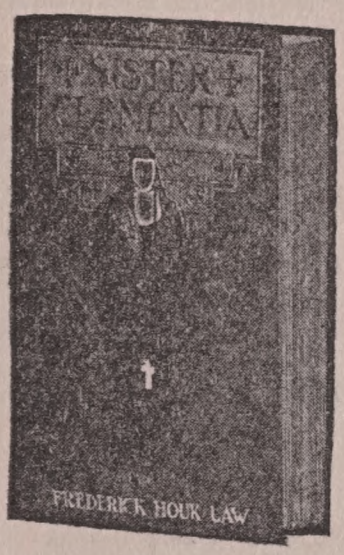

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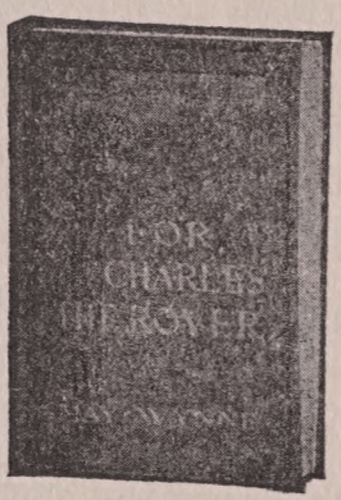

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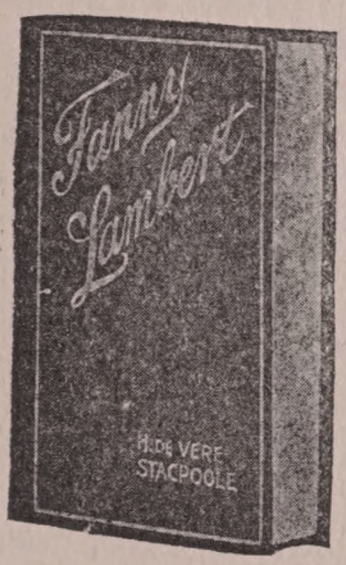

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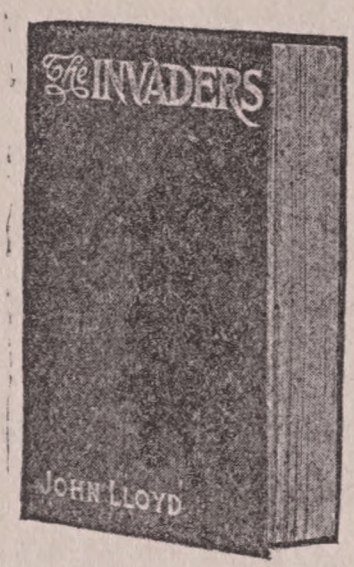

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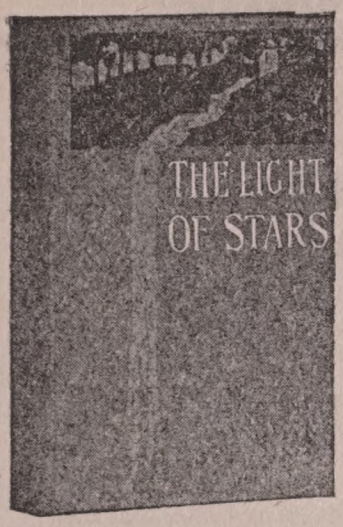

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